

## PART ONE: THE SOVIET EMPIRE



# Chapter 1: Theoretical and Conceptual Considerations

## 1. Conceptual Approaches

The term ‘empire’ is used with deliberation in this book. Obviously, this word has no independent existence. It can encompass only the meaning that social convention allocates to it. Unlike definitions of imperialism, nationalism, or ideology, however, the notion of empire is less controversial and the mental associations produced by it more uniform.<sup>7</sup> The word is derived from the Latin *imperium* which can be rendered as ‘command’, ‘authority’, or ‘power’. *Imperium Romanum* thus denoted the supreme power in Rome and the realm which it commanded. Modern theorists have variously defined empire as ‘any successful attempt to conquer and subjugate peoples with the intention of ruling them for an indefinite period’;<sup>8</sup> as relationships of ‘control imposed by some political societies over the effective sovereignty of other political societies’;<sup>9</sup> and as a state entity in ‘which one ethnic group dominates others’.<sup>10</sup> Empire, according to these definitions, embodies elements of political inequality, military domination, and economic exploitation. These features distinguish empires from federations, confederations, and alliances and explain the more pejorative and emotionally charged ‘imperialism’ – a term that originated in nineteenth century France to denote the grandiose foreign policy designs of Napoleon III and that was used in Britain by supporters and opponents of Prime Mi-

---

7 The discussion of empire and imperialism draws on Ariel Cohen, ‘The End of Empire: Russian Imperial Development and Decline’, Ph.D. thesis, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, December 1993, pp. 12-106. This author was thesis supervisor. The thesis was revised and published as *Russian Imperialism: Development and Crisis* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996). A useful conceptual apparatus and rich empirical data can also be found in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, eds., *The End of Empire? The Transformation of the USSR in Comparative Perspective*, Series ‘The International Politics of Eurasia’, Vol. 9 (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997).

8 John Starchey, *The End of Empire* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1959), p. 319.

9 Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 19.

10 Maxime Rodinson, as quoted in Jan P. Nederveen Pieterse, *Empire and Emancipation* (New York: Praeger, 1989), p. 245.

nister Disraeli to describe his policies of global expansion.<sup>11</sup> Taking these definitions into consideration imperialism here will be understood as a process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire.<sup>12</sup>

There is a curious anomaly, however, when it comes to the consideration of the American and the Russian experience. Imperialism, at the end of the nineteenth century, was considered primarily an activity of the European maritime powers, the British, French, Germans, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch, and less so of the United States or Russia. Perhaps surprisingly, *their* cross-continental expansion was not labelled imperialism but ‘nation building’.<sup>13</sup> The internal structure of the state rather than external expansion was the conceptual lens through which the American ‘manifest destiny’ and Russian ‘gathering of lands’ (*sobiranie zemlei*) were viewed.<sup>14</sup> In the American case, this lens would seem to be appropriate since the massive influx of white settlers did not lead to a system of imperial control but rather to the destruction of the social structure and culture of the Indians and the formation of an entirely new nation state. But the failure to call Russian cross-continental expansion by its proper name is less comprehensible. Certainly, Czarist foreign minister Prince Alexander Gorchakov, one of the architects of Russian imperial expansion, left no doubt as to the nature of the exercise. In a circular letter in 1864, he explicitly told his European colleagues that he did not think that the Russian imperial quest was in any way different from the *mission civilisatrice* of other European powers. ‘The position of Russia in Central Asia [and by implication in other areas subjugated by the Czars] is that of all civilized states which are brought in contact with half-savage nomad populations possessing no fixed social organization.’ In such cases, he explained, ‘the more civilized state is forced in the interest of the security of its frontier to exercise a certain ascendancy over its turbulent and undesirable neighbours.’<sup>15</sup>

---

11 Benjamin J. Cohen, *The Question of Imperialism* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 10.

12 This is the definition used by Doyle, *Empires*, pp. 44–45.

13 Cohen, *The Question of Imperialism*, p. 10.

14 Andreas Kappeler points out that the scholarly literature distinguishes between a ‘classic overseas colonialism’ and an ‘internal’ form; see his ‘The Multiethnic Empire’, in James Cracraft, ed., *Major Problems in the History of Imperial Russia* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1994), p. 401.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 410–11.

In some respects, however, Russia's expansion in the west, south, and east did deviate from previous imperialist patterns. Traditionally, the metropolis was economically, technologically, and culturally the most advanced part of the empire and was able, for this very reason, to spread its influence and maintain control. Yet although military force loomed large in other states' empire-building, Russia's expansion was almost exclusively based on force rather than commercial or cultural pre-eminence. This certainly applied to her subjugation of more advanced peoples and states, such as Poland, Finland, the Baltic nations, the Crimean Khanate, Khiva, and Bukhara. As Count Witte, prime minister under Czar Nikolai II, pertinently remarked, 'Who created the Russian empire, transforming the semi-Asiatic Muscovite Czarism into the most influential, most dominant, grandest European power? Only the power of the army's bayonet. The world bowed not to our culture, not to our bureaucratized church, not to our wealth and prosperity. It bowed to our might.'<sup>16</sup>

The failure to regard Russia as an empire extended into the Soviet era, despite the fact that the Bolsheviks, after having espoused the Wilsonian principles of self-determination, set out to restore the Russian empire. By the end of the civil war, the territorial domain of the USSR largely coincided with the Russia of the Romanovs. Russians were the dominating ethnic component in the realm. As Lenin correctly observed, one only needed to 'scratch a communist to find a Great Russian chauvinist', someone who would advance traditional geopolitical arguments in favor of acquiring warm ports on the Indian Ocean, 'liberating' Constantinople, stirring up revolution in China and India, or who just wanted to ensure a steady supply of Uzbek cotton for the Red Army soldiers, Azeri oil to fuel the tank engines, or Yakut diamonds to pay for the Comintern's revolutionary activities.<sup>17</sup>

Several factors may explain the failure conceptually to consider post-World War I Soviet Russia as an empire. First, the vigorous campaign waged by the Bolsheviks to undermine the British empire in the Middle East and India deceptively made the new Soviet state appear as *anti-colonial* and *anti-imperialist*. Second, the new Leninist connotation of imperialism as the 'highest stage of capitalism' applied only to states with a specific systemic structure and, therefore, by definition not to the Soviet

---

16 I am indebted to Robert Legvold for this quotation but have been unable to verify its source.

17 Cohen, 'The End of Empire', pp. 492-93.

Union. Left-wing political forces in the West and revisionist theorists adopted and disseminated this point of view. Third, European nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century imperialism was based on nationalism and a strong state; Soviet ideology, in contrast, rested on internationalist principles, aimed at the establishment of a universal classless society, and foresaw the withering away of nationalism together with the state. Finally, the sordid business of suppression of national self-assertion and independence, from the Baltic to the Caucasus, and from the Arctic to the Hindukush and the Amur, was not accompanied by much publicity, let alone by 'embedded' television crews. The Soviet armed *reconquista* proceeded largely concealed from world public opinion.

The conceptual muddle was left undisturbed after World War II – despite the Soviet Union's incorporation of the Baltic States; territorial expansion in Europe and Asia; establishment of a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe; and transformation of the country from a regional to a world power. The USSR was largely seen as a case *sui generis* to which it was inappropriate to attach the imperial label. The closest approximation of Soviet realities to Western images of empire occurred during the Cold War when the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were collectively called the 'Soviet bloc' and the Eastern European countries referred to as 'satellites'. But these terms became politically incorrect during the détente period of the 1970s, when Western political leaders attempted to construct a working relationship with the Soviet Union and Western scholars persuaded themselves that they were discovering tendencies of diversity, autonomy, pluralism, and emancipation in the 'former' bloc.

Obviously, such terms as 'empire' and 'satellites' were regarded as anathema by Soviet political leaders and propagandists. Even in retrospect, former Soviet officials have been reluctant to accept such labels. Gorbachev, both when he occupied the highest office in the Soviet Union and after the collapse of the country, refrained from using the two terms. He also resented the characterization of the relationship between the Soviet Union and its Eastern European dependencies as 'colonial'. For instance, when Czechoslovak President Václav Havel visited Moscow in February 1990 and told Gorbachev that his people would 'comprehend that finally the chapter of the traditional, as it were, colonial relations has been closed', his host resented the epithet: 'Once again I had to object and ask the president not to ascribe to us a colonial [design] in our relations

with Czechoslovakia.<sup>18</sup> Even in retrospect, his terminology on Soviet relations with Eastern Europe has remained euphemistic and apologetic.<sup>19</sup>

Georgi Shakhnazarov, his advisor on Eastern European affairs, adopted a similarly equivocal and euphemistic stance on the issue. *He*, at least, acknowledged that one could ‘consider the people’s democracies an organic part or the periphery of a Soviet empire’. He also admitted that it was true that ‘the social and state structures of all the countries belonging to the socialist system were initially, soon after the Second World War, brought under a common roof, that of one and the same Soviet system’; that the Soviet Union ‘held its allies on an economic leash and, often to its own detriment, supplied them with a considerable amount of oil, ore, metals, and at times even grain’; and that the Eastern European countries were pulled into military-political bloc, that their armies were equipped with Soviet weapons, and that in the event of war they had to act together with the armed forces of the Soviet Union under the orders of our High Command’. But, then, he incongruously states that the term empire ‘explains little’. He sees no difference between the position of the United States in the Western Hemisphere and that of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, he rejects the notion that Moscow had been able to behave in the socialist community as it saw fit: ‘Nothing of the sort! ... Within the general principles of relations in the socialist system, there existed specific confines, within which governments could act independently.’<sup>20</sup>

Vadim Medvedev, the former CPSU Central Committee secretary and head of the Department for Liaison with the Communist and Workers’ Parties, in his reflections on the collapse of the Soviet empire, eschewed the sensitive word but aptly considered the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe a single entity, with the latter having formed the ‘outer ring of the Soviet bloc’.<sup>21</sup> Alexander Yakovlev, his former Politburo colleague and Gorbachev confidant, was less inclined to mince words. To him the ‘socialist community’ represented a ‘strange empire’, and one

18 The exchange took place over the content of a joint Soviet-Czechoslovak declaration; see Mikhail Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i reformy* (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), Vol. 2, pp. 360-61.

19 For details see *infra*, pp. 272-73.

20 Georgi K. Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody. Reformatsiia Gorbacheva glazami ego pomoshchnika* (Moscow: Rossika, Zevs, 1993), pp. 96-97.

21 Vadim A. Medvedev, *Raspad. Kak on nazreval v 'mirovoy sisteme sotsializma'* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1994), p. 3.

where, although every leader played his own game and no one derived any special gains from cooperation with the Soviet Union, ‘no one could have even dreamt about the servility of the vassals’.<sup>22</sup> Along the same lines, Vitaly Zhurkin, director of the Institute on Europe, deplored in a discussion at the Central Committee’s Commission on International Policy in June 1990 the ‘amazing (*udivitel’nyi*) empire that we created’ in Eastern Europe – a zone of economic inefficiencies and one where ‘resentment and even hatred toward the Soviet Union could grow’.<sup>23</sup>

If, then, it is analytically useful to treat the Soviet Union as an empire subject to pressures and processes similar to those that affected empires in the past, what are some of the major conceptual approaches that may help us understand both the general and the specific features of the Soviet experience? Four major theoretical approaches can be distinguished. They can be called the metrocentric, the pericentric, the international systemic, and the transnational orientation.

## 2. Metrocentric Approaches

The first orientation can essentially be subdivided into three schools – (1) the radical liberal school, with John A. Hobson as the main proponent; (2) the Marxist school, which includes Rosa Luxemburg, Rudolf Hilferding, and Lenin as the founding theorists, and neo-Marxist authors, such as Paul Baran, Henry Brailsford, Michael Barratt Brown, Victor Kiernan, Harold Laski, John Starchey, and Paul Sweezy; and (3) a political and sociological approach, with Austrian political economist Joseph Schumpeter as the founding father, which emphasizes expansionist inclinations of anti-democratic, militarist elites.<sup>24</sup>

---

22 Alexander N. Yakovlev, *Gor’kaia chasha: Bol’shevism i reformatsiia v Rossii* (Yaroslavl: Verkhnye-volzhscoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1994), p. 191.

23 ‘Peremeny v Tsentral’noi i Vostochnoi Evrope. S zasedaniia Komissii TsK KPSS po voprosam mezhdunarodnoi politiki 15 iyunia 1990 g.’, *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, No. 10 (October 1990), pp. 107-8. Apparently for reasons of what then was still considered to be politically correct, the editors of the journal chose to put Zhurkin’s ‘empire’ in quotation marks.

24 For a critique of neo-Marxist theories of imperialism see Hannes Adomeit, ‘Neo-Marxist Theories of Imperialism: Clarification or Confusion of a Concept in International Relations’, *Co-existence*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (October 1975), pp. 126-48.



Hobson was the first to treat imperialism as a disposition of metropolitan society to extend its rule. He was also the first to connect imperialism and capitalism, disregarding all available evidence that there existed empires based on slave and feudal social organization, and there was at least a theoretical possibility that there would be empires under a different form of societal formation than capitalism. Taking Britain as a point of departure, Hobson portrayed imperialism as the result of forces emanating from its centre. Special interests, led by financiers, encouraged an expansionist foreign policy designed to promote the needs of capitalist investors for investment outlets. These interests succeeded in manipulating the metropolitan politics of parliamentary Britain through their influence over the press and educational institutions, which provided them with imperialistic propaganda.<sup>25</sup>

Lenin's 'territorial division of the world' broadened Hobson's concept of formal territorial annexation to include the exercise of controlling influence by economic means – one of the modes of so-called 'informal imperialism'. For Lenin, imperialism was not only the product of high finance. It was capitalism in its final, monopolistic stage driven to search for overseas profits, raw materials, and markets.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the connection between capitalism and imperialism was both consistent and central for 'mature' capitalist states. 'The necessity for exporting capital', he argued, 'arises from the fact that in a few countries capitalism has become "over-ripe" and ... capital cannot find "profitable" investment.'<sup>27</sup> Imperialism, therefore, was not amenable to reform. It is for this very reason that Lenin attacked the 'revisionist renegade' Karl Kautsky for arguing that 'the urge of present-day states to expand ... can best be promoted, not by the violent means of imperialism, but by peaceful democracy'.<sup>28</sup>

Schumpeter rejected the Marxist approach. 'It is not true', he countered, 'that the capitalist system as such must collapse because of immanent necessity, that it necessarily makes its continued existence impossible by its

25 Doyle, *Empires*, p. 20; summary by Cohen, 'The End of Empire', p. 15.

26 This was authoritatively stated by V. I. Lenin in his *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, 1939, new. ed.: 1969).

27 Ibid., p. 63.

28 Karl Kautsky, *Nationalstaat, imperialistischer Staat und Staatenbund* (Nürnberg, 1915), pp. 70 and 72, as quoted by Lenin, *Imperialism*, p. 112.

own growth and development.’<sup>29</sup> To him, capitalism and imperialism were not only unrelated but antithetical to each other. He defined imperialism as the objectless disposition of a state to unlimited forcible expansion. This phenomenon originated in atavistic, militaristic institutions, such as the ‘war machine’ of ancient Egypt, and similarly aggressive political systems with a dominant social and economic position enjoyed by undemocratic elites and the armed forces. Modern capitalism’s only link to these aggressive forces of imperialism lay in the deformation imposed by the war machines of the absolutist monarchies of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. Their monopoly position in the economy was benefitted by the use of military force abroad. Force, in the perception of the elites, could ‘serve to break down foreign customs barriers’; they ‘can use cheap native labour without its ceasing to be cheap; they can market their products, even in the colonies, at monopoly prices; they can, finally, invest capital that would only depress the profit rate at home’.<sup>30</sup>

The Dutch scholar Jan P. Nederveen Pieterse also rejects the Marxist idea of economic determinism underlying imperialism. To him war and the ‘bloodstained fetish of empire’ are not simply expressions of economic dynamics but ‘primarily political phenomena, a manifestation of political will’. Economic theories of imperialism, while elucidating many pertinent dynamics, at the same time conceal a more important logic in the course of affairs. They failed ‘to address the question of power, which lies with the will to power, especially the will to power of strata who feel insecure in their status. By failing to see power clearly in the past, this perspective clouds the future.’<sup>31</sup>

Consideration of the rise and fall of the Soviet empire makes it necessary to focus not only on developments in the imperial centre, the inner ring of empire, but also in the outer rings. Historians and political scientists have provided some conceptual and comparative approaches which are applicable here.

---

29 Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Imperialism and Social Classes*, transl. Heinz Norden, ed. and with an introduction by Paul M. Sweezy (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1951), p. 108.

30 Ibid., pp. 109.

31 Nederveen Pieterse, *Empire and Emancipation*, p. 216.

### 3. Pericentric Approaches

Following the summary of Cohen, as a reaction to the prevailing views of the metrocentrists, British historian John Gallagher, along with a number of students and colleagues, such as Ronald Robinson and Anil Seal, developed a theory of imperialism primarily concerned with events in the imperial periphery.<sup>32</sup> This approach is conceptually useful in its assertion that empires typically collapse as a result of decay at the centre, severe difficulties of control at the periphery, or a combination of both. Prior to the writings of the pericentrists, empire had been analyzed as if rulers had no subjects and as if Europe's pursuit of profit and power had taken place in a world in which external forces did not exist.<sup>33</sup> The pericentrists, in contrast, proceed from the assumption that 'global power, carried by a ruling nation, cannot in the long run be supported solely by the people of that nation ... In its relations with other peoples such a power must satisfy them and give them an interest in the continuance and stability of the whole'.<sup>34</sup> They regard expansion as a set of 'unequal bargains' between metropolitan agents, sometimes with little support from the centre, and their indigenous allies and opponents, concerned with defending or improving their position inside their own societies.<sup>35</sup> Such concerns obviously provided the centre with levers of influence in accordance with the time-honoured Roman imperial principle of *divide et impera*.

A distinction can thus be drawn between formal and informal empire. The former applies to peoples and nations that are integrated fully into the political and legal system of the imperial state, typically with career opportunities for them in the central administration, with only the lower levels of the imperial bureaucracy manned by locals of the periphery. The latter pertains to those dependent and penetrated societies which retain varying degrees of autonomy and where 'the governance of extensive districts of the colony is entrusted to members of the native elite under the supervi-

32 J. A. Gallagher and R. E. Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Ser., Vol. 4 (1953), pp. 1-15; summary by Cohen, 'The End of Empire', pp. 75-76.

33 Anil Seal, Preface to John A. Gallagher, *The Decline, Revival and Fall of the British Empire* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. viii; quoted by Cohen, 'The End of Empire', p. 75.

34 G. Modelski, quoted in Geoffrey Parker, *The Geopolitics of Domination* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 6.

35 Cohen, 'The End of Empire', p. 76.

sion of imperial governors'.<sup>36</sup> In accordance with this classification, the first ring or inner core of Soviet empire can be understood to be the *formal* empire, while the second and third rings – Eastern Europe first and foremost, but also the dependent states, proxies, and allies outside the Warsaw Pact scattered around the globe from Angola to Mongolia, and from Cuba to Vietnam, can be regarded as forming the *informal* empire.

It can be argued that the more geographically expansive the imperial realm, the more important the levers of informal and indirect control wielded by the centre. One of the major reasons for this lies in the fact that, with the help of cooperative local elites, the direct use of military force can be avoided. Another potential benefit of informal control is the limitation of risk through proxies. In the Soviet empire, East Germany played such a role vis-à-vis the Western allies in and on the access routes to Berlin; Cuba in Central America, Angola, Mozambique, and Ethiopia; and Vietnam in Southeast Asia. 'Sub-imperialisms' are able to develop on the basis of indirect rule. This can be another bonus of informal empire but also potentially a threat since the power of the subordinate entity might turn into a challenge to central influence and control.

Some of the most important factors in the demise of empires are nationalism and tendencies of emancipation. Marxists have been notorious for underestimating this important force of history, assuming that 'objective' class forces rather than 'subjective' factors such as nationalism propelled world events. Indeed, it was the quest for national emancipation that seriously shook the colonial system of the European powers after World War I and II, and finally, in the late 1950s and the 1960s, destroyed it. Willem Wertheim is thus correct in arguing that emancipation is 'a decisive force in both revolution and evolution, and has to be incorporated from the outset as a basic element, instead of being viewed as a force alien to social reality'.<sup>37</sup> Nederveen Pieterse specifies this general observation by stating that the determining forces in the development and decline of empire were not Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism à la Marx, Engels, and Lenin, but the dialectics of 'domination and liberation' and of 'empire

---

36 Doyle, *Empires*, p. 38.

37 Willem F. Wertheim, *Evolution and Revolution: The Rising Waves of Emancipation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 86, as quoted by Nederveen Pieterse, *Empire and Emancipation*, p. 83.

and emancipation'.<sup>38</sup> He also discovered an important dialectic relationship between nationalism and imperialism.

Imperialism creates nations: It naturally highlights the international domain and interstate conflict, and compels resistance to take on a similar form, the form of the nation-state, to act as its counterpart in the arena it has created. If empire building in its earlier stages is actually nation building, empire in its later stages is still building nations: in the process of emancipation from empire by means of defensive assimilation.<sup>39</sup>

The Soviet leaders from Lenin to Gorbachev were to varying degrees conscious of the significance of nationalism. But for the most part they regarded it merely as 'remnants of the past' (*perezhitki proshlogo*) that would, with their assistance, be relegated to the 'rubbish bin of history'. To that extent, the Bolshevik leaders hardly differed from Prince Gorchakov and his conviction that the blessings of progressive ideas and a more advanced social system had to be brought to backward societies. As shrewd political leaders, however, both Lenin and Stalin knew that the remnants of the past were forces to be taken seriously and could be exploited for the consolidation of power. Thus, within days of assuming power, the Bolshevik government issued a Declaration of Rights of the national minorities. Without qualification, it affirmed that every nation had the right to self-determination up to and including secession. The mistaken belief of many of the nationalities that their fate would be better placed with the Reds than the Whites in the civil war following the Bolshevik revolution, helped decide the outcome of the war. Yet the slogan of 'self-determination' not only failed to persuade the nationalities to become more than temporary allies against the Whites and to support the Bolshevik regime unconditionally but gave them the legitimate excuse to go their own way. Wilsonian principles of self-determination, therefore, gave way to 'proletarian self-determination'. On its basis, the leaders in Petrograd dispatched pro-Bolshevik armies to topple newly formed nationalist regimes at Russia's periphery. Although the attempt to restore Russian control over Finland and the Baltic states failed, it was successful in Ukraine, Belorussia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia as well as in Central Asia.<sup>40</sup> As a consequence, the nationalist movements of the regions of

38 Nederveen Pieterse, *Empire and Emancipation*, pp. xiv-xv, 353-81.

39 Ibid., p. 359.

40 See Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime* (New York: Random House, 1995), the chapter entitled 'The Red Empire', esp. pp. 149, 151.

Eurasia incorporated into the Soviet Union were suppressed. Their aspirations, however, were only subdued rather than eradicated.

Nationalism and the forces of national emancipation also played a significant role after World War II in the establishment of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe. Two major problems affected Soviet control. One was the unwillingness of the Eastern European nations to reconcile themselves with their dependent status and their resulting desire to emancipate themselves from Soviet rule. The other is the geographical extension of the problem noted above in the context of the Czarist empire: the subjugation of nations politically and economically more advanced than the core nation of the empire. The consequences became visible, from the Soviet perspective, in the relatively benign phenomenon of ‘national communism’ in Eastern Europe. But it also manifested itself in the more dangerous popular revolts in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and the unrest in Poland in 1956, 1970, 1976, and 1980–81.

Such events serve to clarify that what was at issue in Soviet-East European relations was not a matter of ‘involuntary imperialism’ or ‘auto-colonization’ – at least not on the societal level. As Karen Dawisha has argued, the ruling elites in Eastern Europe adopted a pro-Soviet stance in order to receive Soviet security assistance that would keep them in power. They continued to do so and sought to maintain their colonial status even as the impulse for empire was receding under Gorbachev.<sup>41</sup> However, in larger perspective, neither was the establishment of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe involuntary nor did society there ask to be subjugated. The relationship between the centre and the periphery in this case essentially followed an all-too familiar imperial story. The regimes put in place by the outside power proved to be exceedingly unpopular. This forced the imperial centre recurrently to embark on rescue operations.

The consequences of the extension of Soviet control to Eastern Europe were not always properly recognized. George Kennan, American diplomat, scholar, and author of the influential ‘Mr. X’ article published in *Foreign Affairs* in July 1947. In retrospect, he admitted that ‘a serious deficiency of the article was the failure to mention the satellite area of Eastern Europe – the failure to discuss Soviet power ... *in terms of* its involvement

---

41 Karen Dawisha, ‘Constructing and Deconstructing Empire’, in Dawisha and Parrott, eds., *End of Empire?*, p. 344.

in this area'.<sup>42</sup> The attentive reader, Kennan regretted, had every reason to believe that 'I was talking only about Russia proper' and that the weaknesses of the Soviet system to which he was drawing attention 'were ones that had their existence only within the national boundaries of the Soviet state'. He would have been able to present a far stronger argument about the tenuous nature of Soviet rule, he concluded, if he had added the 'embarrassments of imperialism which the Soviet leaders have taken upon themselves with their conquest of Eastern Europe' and the 'unlikelihood that Moscow would be permanently successful in holding that great area in subjection'.<sup>43</sup>

East Germany and the unresolved problem of a separate East German identity turned out to be one of the reasons why Kennan was right in that Moscow would be unsuccessful in holding on to its extended western glaxis. Indeed, from the very beginning of the post-war era, the division of Germany and thereby the potential resurgence of German nationalism were central to Moscow's problem of managing the new bipolar security order and the Soviet Union's European empire.

Concerning this issue, Stalin was not blinded by ideology but demonstrated political realism. He furthermore exhibited a great degree of scepticism, even cynicism, about the prospect of communist revolution without the direct support of Soviet power. This was amply demonstrated when he told visiting Yugoslav communist Milovan Djilas that in Germany 'you cannot have a revolution because you have to step on the lawn';<sup>44</sup> when he commented dryly on a pre-1941 Soviet war film featuring rebellious elements of the German proletariat disrupting the rear that 'the German proletariat did not rebel';<sup>45</sup> and when he told Polish leader Mikolajczyk that communism fitted Germany 'as the saddle a cow'.<sup>46</sup> He appears to have recognized German nationalism as a strong force that had to be taken into consideration in any post-war European security structure.<sup>47</sup>

---

42 George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1967), p. 357 (italics in the original).

43 Ibid.

44 Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin*, transl. Michael B. Petrovich (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1962), p. 79.

45 Ibid., p. 103.

46 Charles Bohlen in a seminar session, Columbia University, 19 March 1970.

47 For evidence see Hannes Adomeit, *Soviet Risk Taking and Crisis Behavior: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), esp. pp. 129-31.

The realization of the ‘costs of empire’ associated with the processes of national emancipation in Eastern Europe and the unresolved German problem surfaced periodically in the deliberations of Soviet leaders. Several times, latent crises turned acute. However, after the building of the Berlin wall in 1961, awareness of the problem in Moscow was to wane and was to preoccupy the Soviet leadership in a major way only under Gorbachev.

#### 4. International Systemic and Structural Approaches

Yet another explanation of imperialism focuses on the international system. One such approach, as developed originally by Morton Kaplan, is based on the assumption that basic structural features of the system, and the distribution of power within it, determine the behaviour of states and create strong pressures for states to act in certain ways in order to safeguard vital interests. Furthermore, the system would allow the analyst to detect and predict patterns of behaviour.<sup>48</sup> However, as critics have pointed out, Kaplan weakened his argument by asserting that changes of the system occurred as a result of *processes within states*. The fundamental dynamics of international politics, they have charged, thus remained unclear. It left unanswered the central question as to whether the international system shaped the behaviour of states or, conversely, whether the internal make-up of the states determined the structure of the international system. Since Kaplan had made both assertions, the critics have maintained, ‘the logic of his analysis, and hence its capacity for forecasting, was questionable’.<sup>49</sup>

In an attempt to rescue structural theory, Kenneth Waltz has drawn a sharp distinction between what he calls the ‘systems level’ and the ‘unit level’ of analysis, stressing the tight limits set on state action by the international system.<sup>50</sup> Such limits certainly existed in many areas of the politi-

---

48 Basic for this approach is Morton A. Kaplan, *System and Process and International Politics* (New York: John Wiley, 1957), pp. xvii-xviii; see also Kaplan, ‘Systems Theory and Political Science’, *Social Research*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring 1968), pp. 30-47.

49 John Lewis Gaddis, ‘International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War’, *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Winter 1992/93), p. 31.

50 Kenneth W. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979), pp. 97-98, as summarized by Gaddis, ‘International Relations Theory’, p. 31.



cal and military competition between the superpowers. However, there is no particular reason why two superpowers should have been locked in intense struggle had it not been for a specific conception of struggle shared by both of them. As for the United States with its pluralist and democratic structure, it can hardly be said that it was *inherently* prone to define itself as part of an uncompromising, 'antagonist' world. It was only through the definition imposed by the Soviet Union, that of international relations as an 'historically inevitable' struggle between 'two opposed socio-economic systems' that the United States also came to perceive the conflict in antagonist terms. But any major alteration of such a definition in Moscow would cause both the functioning and the basic structure of the bipolar system to change. This was shown conclusively in the second half of the 1980s, when the introduction of perestroika, glasnost, and the New Thinking fundamentally altered international politics. A separation of the international system and the state actors, therefore, is not very helpful.

Jack Snyder, in his *Myths of Empire*, is conscious of the inextricable links between (1) the international system, (2) perceptions, and (3) the domestic politics of states.<sup>51</sup> In an attempt to come to grips with the origins and processes of imperialism in comparative perspective, he tests various hypotheses about these interrelationships in five states: Germany, Japan, Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States. In the process, he distinguishes three theories which, in his opinion, can serve to explain imperial expansion and overexpansion of great powers.

Concerning the first, the international systemic dimension, Snyder tests in particular the theories of the Realist school, according to which expansion is a rational response to international anarchy and the best means of achieving security. Realism, as he explains, imputes to imperial statesmen and strategists the idea that conquest increases power by adding human and material resources that can be used in the competition with other great powers. Conversely, these actors have thought that losses at the empire's periphery could lead to collapse of power in the imperial core. Furthermore, they have maintained that 'the best defence is a good offense'. In this view, cumulative gains in the imperial periphery can be reaped through assertiveness and aggressive action, the establishment of a strategic *glacis* and the creation of buffers, denying the adversary territory and

---

51 Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

manpower, and allowing a cheap defence of empire, whereas defending closer to home would be more costly. Expansion and aggression occur whenever a state's power in the international system is expected to decline. Preventive action then seems required in order to forestall such a development. Finally, as he writes, political leaders in the Realist perspective have acted in accordance with the idea that threats make other states compliant. This belief often implied a contradictory image of the opponent as posing an immense security threat but at the same time as being too weak or irresolute to counter remedial measures adopted by the adversary.<sup>52</sup>

Snyder calls the idea of expansion as a rational response to international anarchy and allegedly the best means of achieving security the 'central myth' of empire but also the 'major force propelling every case of overexpansion by the industrialized great powers'.<sup>53</sup> He sees the tendency toward overextension and overstretch as correlated with each state's position in the international system. Germany and Japan, in this view, were the least buffered from the dangers of international anarchy due to their size, geographical location, and resource endowments. They, consequently, had the most to gain by attempting to expand to a position of economic and military self-sufficiency. Furthermore, changes in a state's international power position over time correlated with the inclination to overexpand, as shown by German and Japanese policies in the 1930s. As for the post-war period and the Soviet Union, he concludes, the period of Moscow's most militant expansion 'coincided with the time of fluid global power relations in Europe; the rise of revolutionary movements in Asia; and significant fluctuations in the nuclear balance'. This 'created an environment that spurred domino fears and worries [in Moscow] about windows of vulnerability'.<sup>54</sup>

His second explanation of imperial expansion and overstretch is cognitive. It addresses the problem of whether imperial myths are predicated upon genuine belief or are mere instruments of policy. Since information for rational decision-making is incomplete, political actors store what they have learned in simplified, structured form. These actors often tended to see current and future events as a rerun of formative experiences in their political career. For instance, 'when a whole generation undergoes the same formative experiences, such as the lessons of Munich, the strategic

---

52 Ibid., pp. 1-18.

53 Ibid., p. 1.

54 Ibid., pp. 306-307. The same was true for the United States in this period, he argues.

policy of the whole state is likely to be affected for many years'.<sup>55</sup> Yet based on the results of his case studies, he casts doubt on the value of cognitive explanations for imperialist policies. He holds that 'beliefs and 'lessons' correlate more strongly with personal and institutional interests than with formative experience.<sup>56</sup>

As for the third – the domestic political – explanation, Snyder sees imperialist expansion as based on parochial interests and emanating from political coalitions, typically including important segments of the military, the military-industrial complex, economic groups seeking to profit from autarky and arms production, and government bureaucracies that stand to gain from aggressive external policies. The theory of domestic coalition politics, he writes, passed both cross sectional and time series tests. In what can be considered a common sense conclusion not necessarily requiring rigorous testing, he concludes: 'Cartelized political systems like Germany and Japan were the most recklessly overexpansionist; democratic systems and systems ruled by unitary oligarchies were less so.'<sup>57</sup>

Snyder's 'scientific' inquiry has both strengths and weaknesses. On the international systemic dimension, useful for analysis here is his observation that 'the strategy of gaining security through expansion is rarely effective because the ideas underlying it contradict two of the most powerful regularities in international politics: the balance of power and the rising costs of expansion'.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, in balance-of-power systems, individual states tend to form coalitions in order to counteract power imbalances created by revisionist states. As will be demonstrated *infra*, similar dynamics applied to the post-World War II bipolar system where both coalitions aimed at military preponderance. However, one of the weaknesses of Snyder's examination is the fact that he draws no clear-cut distinction between expansion and 'overexpansion'; the terms are used interchangeably. But surely there is a major difference. Imperial expansion, where benefits outweigh costs, will frequently command widespread domestic support and pose relatively mild analytical and political problems. Imperial 'overexpansion', where costs exceed benefits, is more difficult to explain. It raises the question as to when, in the opinion of the analyst, political leaders and

55 Ibid., pp. 27-28.

56 Ibid., p. 30.

57 Ibid., p. 308.

58 Ibid., p. 6.

citizens, the advantages of empire turn into liabilities – a difficult question to answer and one that Snyder fails to address.

From practical political perspectives, this distinction is important. As noted in the Preface, Putin's policies on post-Soviet space can be called imperial or neo-imperial, and they are costly. The brilliantly executed annexation of Crimea and the national euphoria that accompanied it compensated for the evident erosion of legitimacy of the 'Putin system', as evident for instance in the large-scale demonstrations in December 2011 and March 2011 for a 'Russia without Putin'. In Russian public opinion, the costs of the Crimean operation in terms of public expenditure were and are low, and in human lives non-existent, but the perceived benefits huge. However, the proportion of people personally willing to pay for the integration of Crimea is low and even much lower is support for any military involvement of the country in eastern Ukraine.<sup>59</sup>

Another weakness in the analysis of the international systemic dimension is Snyder's assertion that imperial expansion is likely to occur whenever a state's power is perceived to decline. In international politics, whether an actor in decline will become more militant and aggressive depends on many factors, including perceived opportunities and risks. For instance, the more assertive Soviet foreign policy after the war in the late 1940s was not only the result of Moscow's security concerns and fears about falling dominos but also because *opportunities* existed for weakening the American position in Europe, undermining the Western colonial system in Asia, exploiting the communist victory in China, and reaping diplomatic capital from the first explosion of a nuclear device. Similarly, the findings about a power responding with assertiveness and aggression to perceived shifts in the 'correlation of forces' in favor of the adversary are at odds with the course of events in the mid-1980s. In that period, the international power position of the Soviet Union had indeed declined, but

---

59 See, for instance, the results of public opinion surveys by the independent Levada polling organisation, 'Prisoedinenie-kryma-k-rossii', Levada.ru, 2 September 2014, <<http://www.levada.ru/print/02-09-2014/prisoedinenie-kryma-k-rossii>> and by the state-owned All-Union Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM), 'Two Thirds of Russians against Sending Troops to Ukraine – Poll,' *Itar.tass.com*, 29 July 2014, <<http://en.itar-tass.com/russia/742703>> and Wciom.ru, 5 February 2015, <<http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=115137>>. For an analysis of such results see Maria Snegovaya, 'Domestic Costs Are Rising for Mr. Putin', *The American Interest*, 19 Februar 2015, <<http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/02/19/domestic-costs-are-rising-for-mr-putin/>>.

the Soviet leadership under Gorbachev responded by pursuing *conciliatory* policies and embarking on a *reduction* rather than an expansion of imperial commitments.

Equally unsatisfactory are some of the Snyder's assertions concerning the second dimension of analysis: the cognitive explanations and their relevance in international politics. In fact, the book harbours a major unresolved contradiction. On the one hand, it denigrates the importance of beliefs and ideas as 'ex post facto justifications for policy and elements of a strategic ideology' and 'rationalizations'.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, it sees various 'myths of empire', that is, erroneous ideas, beliefs, and images as lying at the root of overexpansion by great powers. He concludes that beliefs correlate more strongly with personal and institutional interests than with formative experience. However, to posit congruence between images and interests is denying the possibility that political leaders may free themselves from established beliefs, images, and lessons, and construct an entirely cognitive map and new operational principles. The evolution of the New Thinking in the Gorbachev era, as will be demonstrated, is an example of just such conceptual revision.

Domestic coalition politics is the third and most important explanatory variable in the author's research design. Unfortunately, the findings under this heading are so complex and contradictory as to be almost meaningless. Snyder discerns the dissolution of the 'more cartelized' domestic structure of the Soviet Union in the period between 1953 and 1985 and thereafter, in the Gorbachev era, the emergence of a 'more unitary' and 'more democratic' system that produced more 'moderate' outcomes.<sup>61</sup> But was the Soviet Union under Gorbachev really more 'unitary' than under Brezhnev? Assuming that it was, the author generalizes that 'if strong cartels face a situation of weakly institutionalized democracy and truncated debate, ... then increasing mass participation will exacerbate the cartel's inclination towards overexpansion'.<sup>62</sup> That generalization does sound very erudite but is it applicable to the real world? Not really. Conditions of weak democracy and increasing mass participation did apply in the Gorbachev era but the policies of overexpansion were ended rather than continued, let alone reinforced.

---

60 Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, pp. 306, 308.

61 Ibid., p. 311.

62 Ibid., p. 310.

Almost as an afterthought, and briefly mentioned in the discussion of domestic politics, Snyder makes a final point: ‘Simple logrolling does not explain most of these [five] cases without resort to ideology. In some cases ideology was so integral to the political process that it played a central role in determining what the individual “interest groups” wanted.’<sup>63</sup> This finding raises an interesting as well as fundamental question. Earlier, cognition was declared only marginally significant. But who is to say with precision what part of ideology is genuine and cognitive, what part constitutes formalized perception and dogma, and what part is instrumental? This is a complex but crucial problem for the analysis of each and every major Soviet foreign policy decision that cannot simply be swept under the analytical rug. Ultimately, the reader is left wondering what really is more important for imperial expansion and overstretch: interests or ideology?

Imperial expansion and overstretch are also at issue in studies by Charles Kupchan and Paul Kennedy. In *The Vulnerability of Empire*, Kupchan asks why imperial powers often engage in self-defeating behaviour.<sup>64</sup> Such behaviour, in his view, occurs in response to perceived external threats and is characterized either by overly competitive behaviour, which tends to lead to ‘overextension’, or by overly cooperative behaviour, which results in ‘strategic exposure’.<sup>65</sup> He focuses on selected historical periods in which the United States, Germany, France, and Great Britain engaged, in response to shifts in the international distribution of power, in behaviour that tended to erode their strategic position. Metropolitan vulnerability, he writes, not only results from shifts in the global distribution of power but also from previous elite efforts to enlist public support for imperial policies. That support later constrains the elites from readjusting when the international political landscape changes. Like Snyder’s approach, however, Kupchan’s study is of limited utility for the study of the Soviet empire. Elite perceptions of vulnerability are only one part of the explanation of Soviet overextension under Brezhnev and cooperative behaviour under Gorbachev. To arrive at a fuller more accurate understanding of both imperial expansion and contraction in the Soviet case, many more factors need to be taken into consideration.

---

63 Ibid., p. 314.

64 Charles A. Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).

65 Ibid., p. 14.

Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* is more relevant to the issues discussed in this book.<sup>66</sup> He argues that the relative strengths of the leading nations in world affairs never remain constant, principally because of the uneven rate of growth among different societies and technological and organizational breakthroughs which bring greater advantage to one society than to others. Once their productive capacity is enhanced, they find it easier to sustain the burdens of paying for large-scale armies and fleets. It may sound crudely mercantilistic, he continues, but wealth is usually needed to underpin military power, and military power is needed to acquire and protect wealth. If, however, too large a proportion of the state's resources is diverted from the creation of wealth and allocated instead to military purposes, then this is likely over the longer term to lead to a weakening of national power. In the same way, if a state overextends itself strategically – by, say, the conquest of extensive territories or the waging of costly wars – it runs the risk that the potential benefits from external expansion may be outweighed by the expense of this endeavour. He considers this a dilemma which becomes acute if the nation concerned has entered a period of relative economic decline.<sup>67</sup>

Kennedy's analysis of the great powers' resource allocation dilemma – how much to allocate to 'guns' or to 'butter', to 'profit' or to 'power' – could have been discussed above under metrocentric approaches. However, it also fits into the present framework since Kennedy is interested in the consequences of the state's resource allocation policies for its international power position and policies. He applies this interest to the bipolar system of the post-war era and the competition between the superpowers until the mid-1980s and concludes that the process of a 'nation overextending itself, geographically and strategically' and 'leaving less for productive investment' with its 'economic output slowing down ... and dire implications for its long-term capacity to maintain both its citizens' consumption demands and its international position ... was happening in the case of the USSR, the United States, and Britain'.<sup>68</sup> In retrospect, as with many a good book, there is some doubt as to whether its conclusions and predictions correctly reflected current realities. Certainly, it failed to predict future events. Leaving aside the issue of American economic and mil-

---

66 Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

67 Ibid., pp. xv-xvi.

68 Ibid., p. 539.



itary power and the United States' role in world affairs, the book correctly reconstructed what Sovietologists in their analyses of the Soviet Union then diagnosed as the dilemma of internal decline and external expansion, and a widening gap between a deteriorating economic base and rising military capabilities. This they called the 'paradox of superpower', describing the Soviet Union as a 'military giant but economic dwarf' or 'giant on clay feet'.<sup>69</sup> West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt even referred to the Soviet Union as an 'Upper Volta with nuclear weapons'.<sup>70</sup> Yet, Kennedy thought that this 'does *not* mean that the USSR is close to collapse' and considered it 'highly unlikely that even an energetic regime in Moscow would either abandon "scientific socialism" in order to boost the economy or drastically cut the burdens of defence expenditures and thereby affect the military core of the Soviet state'. The implications of this for the West were unpalatable since there was 'nothing in the character or tradition of the Russian state to suggest that it could ever accept imperial decline gracefully'.

Indeed, historically *none* of the overextended, multinational empires – the Ottoman, the Spanish, the Napoleonic, the British – ever retreated to their own ethnic base until they had been defeated in a Great Power war, or (as with Britain after 1945) were so weakened that an imperial withdrawal was politically unavoidable.<sup>71</sup>

Whereas Kennedy's main proposition concerning the onset of the decline of empires is entirely useful and also applicable to the Soviet Union, none of his predictions about the reactions of the Soviet leadership turned out to be accurate. Gorbachev, already in office for two years when the book ap-

---

69 Some of the best examples is Seweryn Bialer, *The Soviet Paradox: External Expansion, Internal Decline* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986) and Paul Dibb, *The Incomplete Superpower* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988); see also Hannes Adomeit, 'Soviet Foreign Policy: The Internal Mechanism of External Expansion', in id. and Robert Boardman, eds., *Foreign Policy Making in Communist Countries: A Comparative Approach* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1979), pp. 15-48. Pointing to the widening gap between economic and military power in the period from the late 1970s until the mid-1980s, as Arnold Horelick noted, was 'almost becoming a *cliché* among Western Sovietologists'; see his 'External Implications of Soviet Internal Development', in Uwe Nerlich and James A. Thomson, eds., *The Soviet Problem in American-German Relations* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1985), pp. 123-51.

70 In several semi-official speeches and privately.

71 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, pp. 513-14.



peared, embarked on an attempt at fundamentally realigning the relationship between economic and military power. It drastically reduced its imperial commitments. It aimed at significant cuts in defence expenditures. It accepted imperial decline more or less gracefully, certainly without producing cataclysmic international conflict. And the country over which the leadership presided finally collapsed. All this makes the task of analyzing the Gorbachev era even more challenging.

## 5. Transnational Approaches

Doyle is among the few theorists of empire who appreciate the fact that transnational forces in the past influenced both imperialist policies and the form which empires assumed. Settlers, missionaries, merchants, and public officials, as he pointed out, were such forces.

Settlers destroyed native society altogether and welcomed formal imperial rule provided it gave them a substantial voice in colonial policy. Commerce tended to create local oligarchies, which could then become the collaborating classes on which indirect rule depended. The military, which preferred direct rule, destroyed armed tribal opposition and with it many of the leaders who might have collaborated in indirect rule.<sup>72</sup>

But he and other theorists have inadequately focussed on the reverse process: the influence which peripheries have exerted on the centre, often through the same transnational forces that helped shape the dependencies.<sup>73</sup> Theories of international relations, in conjunction with those of the rise and fall of empires, provide the scholar with guidance in understanding the impact of these forces in general and mores specifically in the imperial context.

Karl Deutsch, for instance, in his seminal *Nationalism and Social Communication*, analyzed social, economic and technological processes largely beyond the control of the nation-states and the influence which these processes exert on world development.<sup>74</sup> Far from being prisoners of the nation-state, citizenries, in his view, can bring about change through 'social communication', or transnational, popularly centered activities towards a

---

<sup>72</sup> Doyle, *Empires*, p. 179.

<sup>73</sup> Doyle, *Empires*, p. 38, notes this fact only in passing.

<sup>74</sup> Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1953).

more peaceful and constructive international order. Accordingly, in the late 1970s, in a statement directly applicable to the Soviet-American competition, he thought that the best hope for change in relations among countries that seemingly remain locked in conflict may lie in a 'combined strategy of both internal and external change'.<sup>75</sup>

Several British and American scholars have placed this approach into the general paradigm of global transnational influences and looked at it through the lens of international political economy (IPE). In Britain, these scholars include Robin Brown, Robert O'Brien, and Julian Saurin. IPE is regarded by O'Brien as 'a methodology that identifies the interaction of economic and political domains as the central phenomenon in international relations'.<sup>76</sup>

While he does not focus on any particular context, he notes that transnational influences are more properly examined under the broader aegis of IPE than treated either as a case of simple technology transfer or an issue of international security studies. He, as well as Brown, regards both of the latter as subordinate to the increasing internationalization of politics and economics, in the wake of which the influence of the state will be reduced.<sup>77</sup> Finally, in this group of scholars, Julian Saurin contends that the state 'has been taken as a model' in traditional international relations theory and 'become the constitutive unit of the international system'. He regrets that 'the ontological primacy ascribed to the assumed state has effectively foreclosed alternative accounts of global social change and order that derive from the actual historical experiences of people across the world'.<sup>78</sup> These scholars, while focusing on theory rather than the empirical dimension of East-West relations, reflect the growing importance of

---

75 Karl Deutsch, *The Analysis of International Relations*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), p. 196.

76 Robert O'Brien, 'International Political Economy and International Relations: Apprentice or Teacher?', in John Macmillan and Andrew Linklater, eds., *Boundaries in Question: New Directions in International Relations* (London: Pinter, 1995), p. 90; similarly Richard Higgot, 'International Political Economy', in A. J. R. Groom and Margot Light, eds., *Contemporary International Relations* (London: Pinter, 1994), pp. 156-69.

77 Ibid. and Robin Brown, 'Globalization and the End of the National Project', in Macmillan and Linklater, eds., *Boundaries in Question*, p. 55.

78 Julian Saurin, 'The End of International Relations? The State and International Theory in the Age of Globalization', in Macmillan and Linklater, eds., *Boundaries in Question*, p. 244.

IPE in the study of international relations. Their theoretical constructs, furthermore, are applicable to a variety of specific historical or political contexts, including the disintegration of the Soviet empire.

While British theorists have traditionally focused primarily on the interaction between national political and economic systems, American contributions to the field of International Political Economy have been informed by a larger, international, and institutional approach. Led by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, these scholars have devoted their energies to understanding the extent to which the largely institutionalized post-1945 international regime (anchored by such institutions as the IMF, the United Nations, and the World Bank) has altered or limited the authority of states and their ability to make policy. Grouped together under the headings of Transnational Theory and Neoliberal Institutionalism, these theorists have posited that the role of international institutions and other non-state actors, while largely beneficial, has limited the power of states in ways that have yet to be fully understood. Charles Kegley and Eugene Wittkopf have argued that transnational forces can be ordered according to four categories: trade and capital flows, military alliances, technological forces, and political influence.<sup>79</sup> Nye and Keohane have informed their study with the idea of 'regime change', which tries to explain how the evolution of the international institutional landscape has altered the place of states in the international system. They have observed that international institutions act as 'transmission belts' through which the behaviour of one state affects that of another.<sup>80</sup> They also point out that 'interests are constructed, not given', and that they 'derive not only from considerations of geopolitical position but also from both material interest and conceptions of principle as interpreted through varying domestic political structures'.<sup>81</sup>

The Neoliberal and Institutional perspectives have a bearing on the hotly debated question about the role of external pressure in the collapse of the Soviet empire. To look first at the probably still dominant, alterna-

---

79 Charles W. Kegley, Jr. and Eugene R. Wittkopf, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, 3rd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 24.

80 Joseph S. Nye, Jr. and Robert O. Keohane, 'Transnational Relations and World Politics', *International Organization*, Vol. 25 (Summer 1971), pp. 325-49.

81 Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, 'Introduction: The End of the Cold War in Europe', in *After the Cold War: International Institutions and State Strategies in Europe, 1989-1991*, eds. Robert O. Keohane, Joseph S. Nye, and Stanley Hoffman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 4.

tive Realist interpretation, in a mirror image of Marxist-Leninist concepts, the Soviet system was regarded as being driven by an inherent proclivity to conduct expansionist policies. If it were denied the option of external expansion, the system would either collapse or have to concentrate on internal development. These two outcomes of a strategy of ‘containment’ were first suggested by Kennan in 1947. The United States, in his view, had it in its power ‘to increase enormously the strains under which Soviet policy must operate [not only] to force upon the Kremlin a far greater degree of moderation and circumspection [but also] ... to promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the *break-up* or the gradual *mellowing* of Soviet power’.<sup>82</sup> As it turned out, mellowing preceded the break-up.

But several scholars and policy makers, looking at the world through Realist lenses, went beyond the idea of containment to *isolation* of the Soviet Union in order to achieve either of the two outcomes posited by Kennan. A restrictive technology policy and the curtailment of trade and credit relations were considered to be the appropriate means for this purpose.<sup>83</sup> In the late 1970s and early 1980s, corresponding policies culminated in the deliberate acceleration of the Soviet-American military-technological competition and efforts at raising the ‘costs of Soviet empire’, exploiting its ‘fault lines’ and making sure, to paraphrase Reagan, that it would ‘go down with a whimper rather than a bang’.

Whereas adherents of Neoliberalism and Institutionalism conceded the point of the inherent proclivity of the Soviet system towards expansion, they ruled out the idea of collapse. They stressed instead the evolutionary and reformist potential of the system. A policy of deliberate isolation of the Soviet Union was regarded as too dangerous, since it would increase the risk of military conflict, and also as counterproductive, since it would delay adjustment processes.<sup>84</sup> Some of its adherents thought that the struc-

---

82 George F. Kennan, ‘The Sources of Soviet Conduct’, in id., *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950*, Mentor Books (New York: The New American Library, 1951), p. 105 (italics mine). The quote is from his ‘Mr. X’ article, referred to above.

83 Some of the more prominent Sovietologists that can be regarded as belonging to this school are Zbigniew Brzezinski, Richard Pipes, Abraham S. Becker, Charles Wolf, Andrew Marshall and Michel Tatu; see especially Richard Pipes, *Survival is Not Enough: Soviet Realities and America’s Future* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 266.

84 Sovietologists belonging to this group can be said to include Alexander Dallin, Raymond L. Garthoff, Jerry F. Hough, George F. Kennan and Marshall D. Shul-

tural deficiencies of the Soviet system made it unnecessary to increase pressures from the outside and that governmental as well as transnational interaction, including trade and credit relations, rather than keeping the system alive, would *sharpen* the contradictions and induce reform. Such diagnoses, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, gave rise to a mushrooming literature on ‘convergence’ of the capitalist and socialist systems. Marxist theorists in the United States, Eurocommunists in Western Europe and some communist party officials in Eastern Europe shared these visions and propounded ideas of ‘reform socialism’ and a ‘third road’ between the two systems.

In the West, such notions also provided a conceptual underpinning for the policies of *détente*, ‘bridge building’, ‘constructive engagement’, *Ostpolitik* and *Wandel durch Annäherung*, or change through rapprochement. Western technology, trade and credits, and businessmen and bankers, were deemed to be the kind of transnational forces that would have a major impact on the Soviet empire and contribute to, in Kennan’s terms, ‘mellowing’. Other, equally important forces were held to include Western European social democracy; the Eurocommunist parties, notably those of Italy, France, and Spain; the trade unions; and cultural and church groups. In the East, respondents and agents of change were thought to exist in the form of reform communist parties or reformist factions in orthodox parties.

Such forces were interpreted in retrospect as having been effective in their impact on the Soviet system and empire in the second half of the 1970s and in the 1980s. In that period, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the Helsinki Final Act and the subsequent foundation and activities of Helsinki Groups and Helsinki Committees in communist countries, including in the Soviet Union, were regarded as having provided a particularly useful umbrella under which reformist forces could operate.

Until this very day, therefore, one of the most contentious issues analytically is the question as to what hastened the demise of the Soviet imperial system: the strategies associated with Realist isolation of and pressure on the Soviet Union, or the Neoliberal and Institutional approaches of containment, cooperation, and constructive engagement? Was it ‘hard power’,

---

man. Among German scholars, one of the best corresponding *exposés* is Christoph Royen, *Die sowjetische Koexistenzpolitik im Wandel: Voraussetzungen, Ziele, Dilemmata*, Series Internationale Politik und Sicherheit, Vol. 2 (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1987).

military-political pressures applied by the Reagan administration, that brought down the Soviet empire and the Soviet Union itself? Or was it 'soft power', the success and attractiveness of the Western democratic, pluralist and law-based political systems, a market economy with fair competition and an active civil society, that is, power through attraction 'rather than coercion or payments', combined with policies of détente?<sup>85</sup> Evidently, *both* approaches played a role. The external pressure applied by the United States initially served its purpose in concentrating the Soviet (Gorbachev's) mind on internal development. Once this happened, the mainly Western European policy of constructive engagement at first facilitated and then reinforced Soviet policy shifts. Completing the circle of interaction: once Gorbachev had demonstrated that he was willing to play by Western rules of interdependence and integration, rather than by Leninist principles of antagonism, the United States, too, like Western Europe, put aside the Realist stick and replaced it by Neoliberal and Institutionalist carrots.

## 6. An Integrative Approach

What, then, are the conclusions of this discussion of various theories about the rise and fall of empires? Which of these theories, or parts thereof, can meaningfully be employed for the subsequent inquiry into the collapse of the Soviet empire? One conclusion is that *none* of theories are able to give a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon of imperialism; *most* of them can contribute something to our understanding. International relations, of which the imperialist phenomenon is an integral part, are exceedingly complex. They include ideological, political, military, economic, technological, social, and psychological dimensions, all of which in one way or another impinge on the behaviour of political leaders, elites, and nations. The selection of one single dimension can, therefore, at best illuminate one segment of international relations but never the whole picture.

A similar reasoning can be applied to what in the international relations literature has been referred to as the 'level-of-analysis' problem.<sup>86</sup> Three

---

85 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. x.

86 J. David Singer, 'The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations', *World Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (October 1961), pp. 77-92; see also id., *Models*,

levels can be distinguished, that of the individual leader or statesman; the nation state with different groups, elites and institutions involved in foreign policy decision-making; and the international system. As with the various disciplines, each of the analytical levels and ‘cuts’ can shed light on a given problem of international relations and foreign policy; none is able to explain the ‘essence’ of decisions and events.<sup>87</sup> Thus, while it is useful for heuristic purposes to separate different dimensions and levels, the analyst should try to reconstruct their complex *interaction* and to provide the reader with a hierarchy or *rank ordering* of their importance.

To apply these considerations to the study of imperial development and decline, empires first and foremost need military power in order to expand and maintain control. But they can hardly survive for long by the mere exercise of raw power. Legitimacy is called for. They must pay attention to social costs in order not to lose a modicum of consent of the governed necessary for imperial policies. They need recurrent success as well as an ideological underpinning. Finally, they also require a viable political organization and an efficient economic base in order to sustain effective armed forces and a modern military-industrial complex. None of these factors should be neglected.

An integrative approach is also appropriate when considering the relevance of the four major approaches discussed in this chapter. Obviously, just as foreign policy, imperial construction and decline begin at home. The *metrocentric* view, therefore, is basic to an understanding of the problem of imperialism. But this is not saying very much. It leaves open the whole plethora of problems touched upon, including the question as to the role of individual leaders in the rise and fall of empires and whether the underlying dynamics of the process are power acquisition and aggrandizement, economic determinism, or ideological zeal. The state of affairs at the centre, in turn, cannot be looked at in isolation from what is happening in the imperial possessions and dependencies. A *pericentric* perspective, therefore, has to supplement the metrocentric view. Conditions there decide on the cost effectiveness of imperial rule. This pertains in particular to such questions as to whether the subjects of imperial possessions and

---

*Methods, and Progress in World Politics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1990) and Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

87 Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1971).



dependencies are compliant or prone to resist; whether local elites can be co-opted or have to be tightly controlled; and whether the periphery contributes to the power and wealth of the centre or constitutes a constant drain on its resources. Depending on the answer to these questions, the periphery can present a formidable challenge to imperial control. The same is true for the complexities of the *international system*. Several types of system, including the traditional ‘balance of power’ and the 20<sup>th</sup> century bipolar variants, can be said to have acted as constraints on imperial expansion and contributed to imperial decline.

Finally, *transnational forces* play a role because competing powers will usually attempt to affect the power position of an opposing empire not only by denying it new territory and resources outside its domains but also by fomenting resistance, revolt and revolution in the periphery. This is what the Soviet leadership deplored as ‘inadmissible interference in the internal affairs of socialist countries’ and what the Kremlin at present describes and decries as the essence of ‘colour revolutions’ on post-Soviet space – the assertion that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are essentially ‘foreign agents’; that they are ‘financed by foreign governments’; and that these governments use them ‘as an instrument to carry out their Russian policies’.<sup>88</sup>

There are, of course, pitfalls in adopting an integrative approach. ‘Scientific’ inquiry in practice often consists of isolating a few selected ‘variables’ in order to verify or falsify clearly stated hypotheses. A research design that pays attention to the complex interaction of a variety of factors at various levels of analysis will, therefore, surely expose the analyst to the charge of ‘overexplanation’ of the main problems to be explained. However, it is better to ‘overexplain’ than to underexplain. Given the many insights gained from archives, memoirs, and interviews, it would be a disservice to the reader to deprive him of rich data simply because they do not fit into a narrowly defined analytical framework.

Having stated the research problem, outlined some of the theories applicable and the approach to be taken here, it is now appropriate to begin the next chapter, which consists in a reconsideration of Soviet perceptions of and policies toward the German problem from the division of Germany

---

88 Putin in his in his speech at the 43rd Munich International Security Conference on 10 February 2007, Securityconference.de, <[http://www.securityconference.de/archive/konferenzen/rede.php?menu\\_2007=&menu\\_konferenzen=&sprache=de&id=179](http://www.securityconference.de/archive/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_2007=&menu_konferenzen=&sprache=de&id=179)>.



under Stalin through the hardening of the division under Khrushchev until the last years of the Brezhnev era. The analytical thread that will help the reader find his way through the empirical maze will be the Ideological and Imperial paradigm.

