Death by demography: 1979 as a turning point in the disintegration of the Soviet Union

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Abstract
The 1979 census conducted across the vast expanse of the Soviet Union revealed that the make-up of the country's population had undergone enormous change. The census recorded low birth-rates among the Slavic population relative to their Central Asian compatriots, among other trends. The results were worrisome to Soviet planners in that they feared that these domestic population trends were going to undermine the country's power. At the same time, Soviets faced the defeat of communist allies in Afghanistan at the hands of fighters beholden to religion, and an Islamic revolution in Iran. What these dynamics revealed was a complex interplay between domestic, regional and international politics. Interpreted through the lens of population dynamics, the convergence of these events revealed 1979 to be a critical turning point in the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Keywords
Afghanistan, census, demography, disintegration, Iran, nationalism, power transition theory, religion, secession, Soviet Union, war

On 17 January 1979 the sixth all-Union census was conducted across the vast expanse—22 million square kilometers—of what was once the Soviet Union, then the second most materially powerful state in the world. Politicians, economics, sociologists and economists attached significant weight to the results, which revealed that the character of the population of the Union had undergone—and would probably continue to undergo—enormous change. One of the most alarming of the trends revealed by this census was the low birth-rate among the European peoples relative to their Central Asian compatriots. The results were so worrisome to Soviet officials that publication of the census was delayed for five years. As the New York Times reported in 1985, “The Soviet Union has become increasingly secretive, and the published results of the last census, in 1979, were far more restricted than those of the two preceding counts, in 1970 and 1959” (Shabad, 1985). The question is why?
The demise of any state—whether slow or fast, whether at war or at peace—is necessarily a complex matter, and each case is at root unique (Fazal, 2007). However, stepping back, understanding the causes of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, formally in 1991, is critical for at least three reasons. First, in military and geopolitical terms, the Soviet Union was, from the 1940s until the 1970s, one of the most powerful states in world history: a “superpower”. Second, as a nominally revolutionary state with expansionist DNA, understanding which of the several plausible causes of its disintegration mattered most holds important lessons for contemporary foreign policy. Third, the disintegration of the USSR led to a number of armed conflicts, some of which still simmer and may re-ignite at any time.

The three most common explanations for the disintegration of the Soviet Union are (1) overextension (which could take the form of imperial overexpansion or excessive military spending as a percentage of gross domestic product, GDP), (2) a faltering economy and (3) the unintended consequences of Gorbachev’s reform efforts (in particular the mutually reinforcing effects of glasnost and perestroika). These three causes are all related, and arguably had a real impact on the disintegration of the Soviet Union, but this paper advances a novel claim: Soviet demographics mattered as much or more than these other causes of disintegration. In fact, the process of disintegration began in 1979, well before the other proposed causes could have been significant enough to have the causal impact widely attributed to them.

This paper argues that the 1979 census revealed a number of startling trends in the make-up of the population of the USSR, notably an increase in the Muslim population in Central Asia. To be sure, other demographic developments in the Soviet Union—including labor force issues, urbanization or the lack of urbanization by historically Muslim groups, and a mounting health crisis reflected in a spike in infant mortality—were also important, but the high growth rate of the Muslim population was a critical factor, if not the most, for the demise of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the timing of this census was key as 1979 proved a watershed in terms of conflict along the Union’s southern periphery, further intensifying the alarm provoked by the census. The imminent ousting of Afghan communists by Afghan Mujahideen (and soon foreign Muslim fighters) forced the Soviets into a reluctant intervention to preserve communist power; and in Iran, the Soviets watched an Islamic revolution with increasing trepidation. Soviet leaders in Moscow felt as if the world within and around them was becoming “Muslim”, and that this posed a threat to their control and power, and the cohesion of the USSR itself.

In a state with vast coercive and material resources, which had sustained three generations of heroic efforts to create *homo sovieticus*, it was a sobering turn of events. The census underlined to its leaders and many beyond the Urals and to the South that these efforts were failing.

**Theoretical frame**

Before addressing how demographic changes within the Soviet Union led to its disintegration, it is necessary to consider the most common explanation of why the Soviet Union broke apart into 15 remnant states in 1991: overextension. Although in his seminal work, *Myths of Empire*, Jack Snyder (1991) contends that overexpansion can result from statesmen believing that the anarchic nature of the international system makes preventive aggression necessary or, alternatively, that overexpansion can be a consequence of misleading beliefs and biases of political leaders about the need for imperial expansion, his core argument is that overexpansion is usually a consequence of coalition interests. These coalitions derive benefits from expansion and therefore propagate the notion that security can be ensured only through expansion (Snyder, 1991: 21–55).

Indeed, the Communist Party institutions in the Soviet Union had a vested interest in exaggerating threats from the international environment, since this allowed them to more effectively
mobilize for their revolution from above (Snyder, 1991: 238). The idea that security demands expansion became deeply rooted in the strategic culture of the Soviet Union, which, in turn, resulted in domestic political coalitions, including members of the Politburo and the military industrial complex, shaping foreign and security policies in an expansionist direction (Snyder, 1991: 238). The overextension of the Soviet Union arguably began with the annexation of the Baltic states and eastern Poland in 1939–1940, as well as the subordination of the formerly independent states in Central and Eastern Europe by the end of Second World War (Szporluk, 1997: 78). In addition to this overextension at the periphery, the Soviet Union pursued an aggressive foreign policy from the end of the Second World War onwards, which was arguably based on the idea that socialism needed to replace capitalism in the more advanced countries in order to secure the revolution in Russia (Snyder, 1991: 212). This aggressive foreign policy was most visible in the decades of competition with the United States (US) for nuclear superiority (Mearsheimer, 2001: 224–232). Various sources estimate that, by the early 1980s, the Soviet Union spent between 15 and 20% of GDP on defense, which was at least four times the US level (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2001: 23). That the Soviet Union could not sustain the cost of this intense power struggle has also been stressed by many Soviet policy-makers (Ellman and Kontorovich, 1997: 259–279; Odom, 1998: 225). From this perspective, the Soviet Union was unable to maintain the arms race with the US and its allies or sustain resistance against domination within its sphere of influence, resulting in its downfall.1

In fact, the Soviet Union’s expansion proved modest; more importantly, it was able to retrench after each episode of overextension (Snyder, 1991: chapter 6). For example, it retrenched from its aggressive stance in order to “demobilize the opposing forces their actions had conjured up” after both Khrushchev’s missile diplomacy and Brezhnev’s Third World expansionism (Snyder, 1991: 213). Similarly, Gorbachev retrenched from 1985 onwards. Snyder notes in this regard that the USSR’s security policy in general emulated a prickly but defensive hedgehog (Snyder, 1991: 213). Given this history, overexpansion is an unsatisfactory explanation of the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

An alternative, but closely related, line of reasoning focuses on the impact of economic over-extension leading to a moribund economy. Brooks and Wohlforth (2001), for example, argue that the Soviet Union’s retrenchment during the 1980s is best explained through its inability to keep up with the world’s major economic powers in terms of technological progress. It became increasingly apparent throughout the 1980s that the globalization of production disfavored the Soviet Union. Not only could it not profit as much as the Western countries from inter-firm alliances and increased geographic dispersion of production, but it could also not attract as much foreign direct investment (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2001: 34).

To reverse the country’s economic decline starting from the mid-1970s, Soviet leaders sought to attract Western technological know-how and investment capital. To do so meant reducing security competition with the West throughout the 1980s, but also liberalizing their political system at home (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2001; Mearsheimer, 2001: 202). As noted by Snyder, Gorbachev needed a durable detente as “Soviet military buildups only provoked a high-technology arms race that starved Soviet civilian sectors of scarce inputs and heightened Western vigilance against technology transfers to the East” (Snyder 1991: 251). The process of retrenchment and political liberalization, however, had the unintended consequence that it unleashed nationalist forces, leading to the break-up of the Soviet Union (Karklins, 1994; Suny, 1993). In other words, the break-up of the Soviet Union can be explained through the material pressures Soviet leaders faced as a result of rapidly changing global modes of production. Such dynamics imply that “far from abandoning realist principles, the behavior and thinking of Soviet Leaders reinforce the pattern of history that states seek to maximize their power in order to remain secure from international rivals” (Mearsheimer, 2001: 202).
External material pressures, both owing to security competition and because of the changing structure of global production, thus play a central role in conventional explanations of the break-up of the Soviet Union. Although powerful logically and seeming to have support empirically, the argument put forward here shifts focus to the domestic make-up of the Soviet Union to explain its demise, which too has a powerful—and similar—logic and empirical support. It is argued that, as a result of a demographic shift in favor of the Central Asian population of the Soviet Union, decision-makers in Moscow faced incentives to compel the Central Asian republics to secede. Realpolitik thus also plays a central role in this explanation, but rather than solely focusing on an international rival, the focus is on security threats originating from different ethnic groups within a state.

That population shifts within a multinational state are a source of political instability has been found elsewhere. For example, drawing on Power Transition Theory (PTT), Toft (2007, 2012) argues and finds that population shifts make civil war more likely. This application of PTT to political units within states is similar to Organski’s (Organski, 1958; Organski and Kugler, 1980) original application of PTT to powerful states in the international system. The logic of PTT hinges on the interaction between two key explanatory variables: relative power and the degree of satisfaction with the status quo (Toft, 2007, 2012). If relative power approaches parity, rising political units or groups dissatisfied with the status quo might find themselves with more leverage to make demands. Realizing that the dissatisfied power will become increasingly stronger over time, the waning political group will be likely to have strong incentives to take preventive measures (Toft, 2007, 2012). While a preventive (intrastate) war is one option to react to a changing balance of power within a state, another option for a core unit of a state would be to push particular ethnic groups towards secession in order to restore the balance in favor of the core group.

While the explanation of the demise of the Soviet Union put forward in this article emphasizes changes within the demographic make-up of a state, this does not mean that international aspects do not play a role. On the contrary, the extent to which demographic shifts within a country are perceived as a threat to the core group can be significantly influenced by events on a regional or even global level. As explained by Collins, “If an overextended imperial state becomes embroiled in ethnic and political conflicts within a distant client state, there is a strong tendency for these foreign instabilities to become gradually incorporated inside the imperial state’s own boundaries” (Collins quoted in Szporluk, 1997: 81). In other words, when thinking about the economic pressures that faced the Soviet Union in the 1970s and in particular the 1980s, we need to ask not only what a Soviet economy could produce, but also what taxed it; and nothing taxes an economy like defense spending. From this perspective, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the Islamic revolution in Iran intensified the perceived Muslim threat among Soviet leaders.

Indeed, several scholars have noted that the importance Soviet leaders attached to the demographic changes reflected in the 1979 census cannot be fully appreciated without taking into consideration the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the revolution in Iran. Lapidus claims that it is not only the “astonishing demographic vitality of Soviet Central Asia” that has made the rise of Islamic fundamentalism a concern to Soviet domestic and foreign policy, but also the events in Iran and Afghanistan (Lapidus, 1984: 558). Heleniak asserts in this respect that “The period of the early 1980s marked a return to a more anti-Islamic policy, in part due to fears of the possible influence of Iran and Afghanistan” (Heleniak, 2006: 429). Similarly, Bennigsen and Broxup identify in their work The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State the revolution in Iran and the intervention in Afghanistan as the two major events that shaped the internal threat that Muslim loyalties pose to the unity of the Soviet Union (Bennigsen and Broxup, 1983: 108).

In sum, based on the idea of the make-up of the core population of the Soviet Union, Soviet leaders faced realpolitik incentives during the 1980s to fear and counter the population trends
emerging in the Central Asian republics. These incentives were based not only on domestic interests, but also on regional and global interests. The subsequent sections analyze the 1979 census and its political consequences, as well as the influence of the war in Afghanistan and the revolution in Iran on elite perceptions about the threat of the relative increase of the Muslim populations in the broader reaches of the Soviet Union. What we find is an interplay of realpolitik concerns at the domestic, regional and international levels.

The 1979 census—internal politics

In 1979, the total population of the Soviet Union was 262 million. Russians were the largest group, 137 million, making up 52%, with most living in Russia. The next largest group was Ukrainians, making up 50 million, followed by Belarusians at 9.5 million (Feshbach, 1982).

The Soviet Union well understood the importance of demographic matters, especially as a state that relied on centralized planning and control. Three nationwide censuses were conducted prior to the Second World War (1926, 1937 and 1939), with the 1937 census in particular raising alarm for Soviet planners and decision-makers. This census revealed the extent to which Stalin-era policies of collectivization, resulting in large-scale famine, had proved catastrophic: some tens of millions of people were missing. In addition, a question about religion was added, with the expectation that most people would self-identify as atheist. This question revealed that high levels of religiosity were maintained. As a result, this census was suppressed by Soviet Leader Josef Stalin himself (Anderson and Silver, 1985).

In the post-Second World War period (until 1980), three additional censuses were conducted: in 1959, 1970 and 1979. After the 1959 and 1970 censuses, the government published the results in a multitude of volumes. While 16 volumes containing the results of the 1959 census and seven volumes containing the results of the 1970 census appeared, of which the first volumes were both published within two years, only a very limited share of results of the 1979 census was initially published by the Central Statistical Administration in the Vestnik Statistiki [Statistical Herald] and in the general news media (Feshbach, 1982: 347). It was only after five years that the results were published, and even more tellingly, as only two volumes. Not surprisingly given this delay and limited output, the published results were far more limited, revealing Moscow’s reluctance in the kinds of information Soviet planners were willing to share.

The reason for this time lag in publication is that the results of the census were a major concern at the highest levels of decision-making. Not only did the 1979 census reveal an aging of the overall population, but it also revealed differential rates of population growth among different ethnic groups. Keeping in mind that a critical aim of Soviet educational and social policy for decades had been the eventual withering away of nationalist and religious identities and their replacement with a shared “Soviet” identity, Central Asians, although non-white, should have shared a roughly similar demographic profile with other regions of the USSR. However, they did not. Women in these republics were consistently having more babies as a result of higher fertility rates. Indeed, the census confirmed anxiety over the changing nature of the demographic structure of the Soviet Union, in particular the low growth rate of the Slavic peoples in contrast to the relatively fast rate of growth of the “Muslim” populations.

The rise of the Muslim

Murray Feshbach, a leading Western demographer of the Soviet Union, was one of the first to put forward evidence showing the relative increase in the Muslim populations in an article published in 1982. Since the results of the 1979 had not yet been published, Feshbach reconstructed the
demographic trends by looking at the male mortality and birth figures of the different regions. Feshbach calculated that the rate of growth from 1970 to 1979 among the Muslim populations was three to four times higher than that of the Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians and reflected a slowdown overall in the period 1959–1970 (Feshbach, 1982: 349). Furthermore, in 1979, 81% of the population of Central Asia was Muslim; 15%, or nearly 4 million, consisted of ethnic Russians, who were concentrated in cities. Of the Muslim nationalities, Uzbeks were the largest with more than 12 million people in 1979, making them third largest national group in the USSR after Russians and the Ukrainians. There were nearly 3 million Tajiks, and the Kirghiz and Turkmen populations totaled about 2 million each. According to Feshbach, these figures clearly indicated a “burgeoning of Muslim population and a decline in Slavic population” (Feshbach, 1982: 359).

Based on the limited information of the published results of the 1979 census, Anderson and Silver came to a similar conclusion in 1989. They report that, while the 1959 census had revealed that Russians exceeded non-Russians by 19.4 million, the 1970 census showed this figure to be 16.3 million and the 1979 census indicated that it had further dropped to 12.7 million (Anderson and Silver, 1989: 609). When distinguishing between Russians, non-Russian Slavs, other non-Muslims, and Muslims, Anderson and Silver further found that all four subgroups increased in absolute size between 1959 and 1989, but only Muslims increased as a proportion of the Soviet population (Anderson and Silver, 1989: 618). The growth rate of Muslims thus far exceeded that of the other three groups, resulting from traditions of early marriage, child-bearing being highly valued, and the dislike of birth control methods (Silver, 1974: 52).

As a result, the population growth of the Soviet Union as a whole became increasingly driven by the growth of the Muslim population. Anderson and Silver estimate that the Muslim share of the Soviet Union’s total population growth was 31.7% between 1959 and 1970, after which it grew to 42.5% between 1970 and 1979 (Anderson and Silver, 1989: 618). Kazakhstan and Kirgizia are the most extreme examples of the Muslim populations producing more children than their non-Muslim republican compatriots, with the total fertility rate at 3.11 and 4.41 respectively for the total population, but 4.53 and 5.90 for the titulars (Feshbach, 1982).

The 1979 census also revealed the growth rates of different nationalities within republics. It turned out that the titular nationality had grown more rapidly than the Russian nationality in every non-European republic between the 1970 and the 1979 census. This trend was the opposite in every European republic, in which the Russian nationality had grown more rapidly than the titular nationality. Anderson and Silver summarize this trend by stating that the European republics had become more “Russianized”, whereas non-European republics had become less “Russianized” (Anderson and Silber 1989: 633). Table 1 summarizes the average annual growth rates of these different populations within the Soviet Union between 1970 and 1979, from which it follows that the growth rates of the Muslim populations indeed were much higher than those of the non-Muslim populations.

Taking ethnicity as the chief way to identify the populations and understand the birth rates, the 1979 census thus showed that the fecundity rates of Central Asian populations far exceeded those of their non-Central Asian counterparts. There was in essence a demographic shifting of the population to the southeast (Perevedentsev and Meyer, 1980: 171). Compared with the 1970 census, the populations of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus had grown only by 6%, yet the populations in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan had grown by 30 and 28% respectively. The fear that “Russians” were becoming a minority population in the Soviet Union became a reality in the 1979 census.

Furthermore, the results of the 1989 census show that the demographic trends revealed in the 1979 census continued throughout the 1980s. Drawing on unofficially published data of the 1989 census, supplemented with some unpublished data to which they had access, Anderson and Silver concluded that ethnic Russians composed of 50.8% of the total population in 1989 (Anderson and Silver, 1990: 156). Crucially, they further estimated that this figure would drop below 50% by the
mid-1990s (Anderson and Silver, 1990: 156). Moreover, while Muslims contributed 42.5% of the total population growth of the Soviet Union between 1970 and 1979, this was 50% between 1979 and 1989 (Anderson and Silver, 1989: 618; 1990: 156). As a result of high fertility rates in the Muslim republics the population growth rate in these republics was 2% per year, whereas this was less than 1% per year in the non-Muslim republics (Anderson and Silver, 1990: 160). In other words, the fears about “Russians” becoming a minority population that surfaced after the 1979 census were confirmed in the 1989 census.

Table 1. Average annual growth rates between 1970 and 1979.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population in 1979 (000)</th>
<th>Average annual growth rates (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>262.085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russians</td>
<td>137.397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukrainians</td>
<td>42.348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbeks</td>
<td>12.456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belarussians</td>
<td>9.052</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tatars</td>
<td>6.185</td>
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<tr>
<td>Azerbaidzhans</td>
<td>5.477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhs</td>
<td>5.299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenians</td>
<td>4.151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgians</td>
<td>3.571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldavians</td>
<td>2.968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tadzhiks</td>
<td>2.898</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lithuanians</td>
<td>2.851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkmenians</td>
<td>2.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germans</td>
<td>1.936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirgiz</td>
<td>1.906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>1.811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chuvash</td>
<td>1.751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvians</td>
<td>1.439</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bashkirs</td>
<td>1.371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mordvinians</td>
<td>1.192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poles</td>
<td>1.151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonians</td>
<td>1.020</td>
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Consequences

In line with the realpolitik idea implicit in PTT that a rising political unit will be eager to change the status quo (in particular the distribution of valued resources assumed to favor the incumbent political unit; Toft, 2007: 245), one would expect the demographic changes described above to have major implications for the political dynamics within the Soviet Union. Indeed, Anderson and Silver identify the assertion of rights of ethnic minorities, reflected in demands for a higher degree of political, economic and cultural autonomy, as a direct result of demographic changes (Anderson and Silver, 1989: 609; 1990: 156). Lapidus notes in this regard that the high birth rates of the
nationalities in Central Asia provided them with greater confidence and assertiveness to obtain more resources and greater political representation (Lapidus, 1984: 571). Speeches by Central Asian representatives at Supreme Soviet session in October 1980 illustrate this new assertiveness. When requesting additional allocations for housing, the Uzbek deputy explicitly referred to Uzbekistan’s “leading role” in the Soviet Union’s population growth (Weber and Goodman, 1981: 287). Similarly representatives of the Tajikistan’s trade union highlighted their republic’s rapid population growth when requesting additional investments in light industry in order to stimulate employment (Weber and Goodman, 1981: 287).

Perhaps even more worrying to Moscow was the fact that these same political elites increasingly mobilized popular support in order to further their interests (Burg, 1984; Roeder, 1991). Indeed, the population growth of Muslims within the Soviet Union not only affected numerical relationships between the Central Asian republics and Russia, but it also changed the numerical relationship within the republics. A survey conducted of Soviet citizens by Karklins in 1979 suggests that most Central Asians perceived the high birth rates of Muslims as increasing the power of the local nationalities in the Central Asian republics (Karklins, 1986: 81–83). Karklins (1986: 97) notes that by the late 1970s the legitimate role of the locals as the “masters” of the Central Asian republics became a reality, which was grudgingly accepted by the non-Muslim sector of the population.

By contrast, Slavic nationalities experiencing declining birth rates developed a growing concern over the perceived threat to their national identity (Kingkade, 1992: 253; Lapidus, 1984: 571). As observed by Heer, the idea that the gap between the fertility of the Islamic and non-Islamic populations should be reduced had already been engaging Soviet demographers for several years (Heer, 1977: 240). A typical proposal is that of the director of the Center for the Study of Population Problems at Moscow University, Dmitri Valentei, who suggested as early as 1967 that demographic policies should be different for different regions: “what is appropriate, say, for the Ukraine and the Baltic region is completely inappropriate in Central Asia or Azerbaidzhan” (Valentei quoted in Heer, 1977: 240). Commenting on the 1979 census, Viktor Perevedentsev, one of the Soviet Union’s most prominent demographers, stated that “the census confirmed once again that unfavorable changes are taking place in the processes of population increase and reproduction” (Perevedentsev quoted in Siegelbaum, 1980).

However, it was not until after the 1979 census that the issue rose in prominence at the highest levels. At the 26th Congress in 1981, Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev stated that “although the Soviet nations are now united more than ever … this does not imply that all the problems of the relations between nationalities have been resolved. The dynamics of the development of a large multinational state like ours gives rise to many problems requiring the Party’s tactful attention” (Brezhnev quoted in Lapidus, 1984: 556). The population policies developed at the 26th Congress reflected the growing concern over the demographic trends that the 1979 census revealed. One such policy employed a regionally differentiated policy to regulate population growth. The Congress proposed grants for first and second births and partially paid maternity leave in order to raise the birth rate in the Slavic republics, which experienced low fertility rates (Weber and Goodman, 1981: 288–289).

Richard Kosolapov, a leading Party theoretician, stated that “as the 26th CPSU Congress pointed out, social classes will largely disappear while we are still in the historical period of developed socialism. The same cannot be said of socialist nations, which are more stable social and ethnic entities. As for the racial, national, and ethnic differences among major population groups and individuals, these will undergo substantial changes, of course, as a result of migration and the constant intermixing of the population, but in principle they are indestructible. Only given this condition can we realistically conceive of the future merger of nations?” (Kosolapov quoted in Lapidus,
1924: 564). Similarly, Yuri Andropov, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, stated on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Soviet Union that the successes of the Soviet Union in “solving the nationalities question certainly do not mean that all the problems engendered by the very fact of the life and work of numerous nations and nationalities in the framework of a single state have disappeared. This is hardly possible as long as nations exist, as long as there are national distinctions. And they will exist for a long time, much longer than class distinctions” (Andropov quoted in Lapidus, 1984: 556).

This is line with the argument made by Helene Carrère d’Encausse in her Decline of an Empire (1979), in which she emphasized the uneven demographic development among the different groups in the USSR, particularly Muslims in the largely non-industrial regions. Her focus was not on political dynamics and the stability of the state, but on the failure of the system to create homo sovieticus—the Soviet man shorn of nationality, language and faith. Other scholars also noted the Soviet Union’s failure to break down the barriers between ethnicity, religion and nation. Bialer argued that “the polarization of the Soviet peoples along ethnic lines is increasing faster than their identification with, and consciousness of, a new Soviet nationhood” (Bialer, 1980: 208).

Indeed, intercultural relations among the Slavic populations and the Muslim populations were extremely low. As Karpat puts it, the cultural bond among Soviet Muslims created “an invisible barrier separating them from the ruling Slavs” (Karpat, 1983: 79). One need only consider intermarriage rates, with Muslims preferring to marry only fellow Muslims (especially for women) and the strong tendency to maintain Islamic traditions, including burial rites and circumcision. As Karklins, an ethnographer of the Soviet Union, explained:

If one asks about the implications of the near-universal observance of these three aspects of Islam, non-intermarriage is most understandable since the consequences are so concrete. It excludes ethnic integration from the familial and communal sphere in which particularism and “staying apart” are valued exceedingly highly … In fact religious and national identity are inseparable for many Soviet Muslims, and the repudiation of religion and the old traditions is interpreted as a repudiation of one’s nationality. (Karklins, 1994: 194–195)

This is consistent with a statistical analysis by Silver, conducted as early as 1974, in which he found that Muslims as a group were not very susceptible to Russification compared with the Orthodox groups (Silver, 1974). In addition to aspects related to Muslim culture, Bennigsen and Broxup (1983: 9) argue that another reason for what they describe as “the hopeless dream” of a “cultural or biological symbiosis” between Russians and Muslims is the Russian hatred toward the Muslims.

The poor intercultural relations among the Slavic populations and the Muslim population intensified the perceived threat of an increasingly growing Muslim population within the Soviet Union. This concern was most clearly advanced by Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. For Russian nationalists their world was seen to be collapsing so much so that Solzhenitsyn authored the pamphlet How Shall we Rebuild Russia, calling for the government to allow the Central Asian republics to secede if they desired it, and that, in the case of the Central Asian republics, Russia should compel them to go (CIA, 1999 [1991]: 10). This is despite the dire warnings issued by Russians living in the Central Asian republics who expressed not only indignation over being “refugees in their own country”, but also fears over what “religious—that is, Muslim—fanaticism could bring” (CIA, 1999 [1991]: 9). Moreover, although public opinion polls at the time indicated that Russians might have preferred for the USSR to remain intact, few were willing to sanction the use of force to do so (CIA, 1999 [1991]: 9).
This failure to develop a common Soviet identity meant that the USSR continued to be largely seen as a Slavic–Christian empire, one might even say a “Russian–Christian” empire, as most parts of the USSR (Georgia notably excepted) had been incorporated by force into the pre-revolutionary czarist empire. This explains why, when the Soviet Union was collapsing, leaders in Moscow were keen to sustain ties to Ukraine and Belarus, as well as Kazakhstan, all of which contained large “Russian” populations, but willing to let other parts go (CIA, 1999 [1991]).

In sum, the logic of PPT sheds light on the dynamics leading to the demise of the Soviet Union. The Central Asian republics can be seen as rising political units making re-distributional demands, which increased tensions. Rather than responding with a preventive war, political leaders in Moscow, who largely represented the Slavic core population of the Soviet Union, responded by ‘letting go’ the Central Asian republics. Indeed, virtually none of the newly independent states in Central Asia that emerged as consequence of the break-up of the Soviet Union had developed a coherent separatist movement, indicating that their independence was imposed on them from the outside rather than achieved through self-determination (Zaslavsky, 1992: 98 and 108).

**Economic factors?**

Although it is clear that demographic shifts influenced the thinking at the highest levels in the Soviet Union, demography was not the only dynamic undergoing change. The Soviet economy was in decline. In this regard Brooks and Wohlforth argue that it is critical to any ideational explanation of the break-up of the Soviet Union to carefully assess exactly how constraining the Soviet Union’s economic problems were (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2001: 11). While the Soviet Union experienced rapid economic growth from the 1920s to the 1960s, these growth rates began to decline steadily from the 1960s. Crucially, however, the economic situation suddenly deteriorated, beginning in the mid-1970s. In addition to a steep economic decline, reflected in the slowing down of industrial production and productivity, rates of return on capital investment, expenditures on research and development and rate of technological innovation in the same period all suffered (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2001: 16). Mikhail Gorbachev’s announcement a few months before he took office that restoring economic growth was a necessary condition for preserving the Soviet Union’s status as a great power suggests that the Soviet leaders were well aware of this dire situation (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2001: 19–21).

As described in the theoretical frame above, this perceived need to catch up with the technological advances made in the West explains the decision of Soviet leaders to pursue a policy of entrenchment and political liberalization in the late 1980s. While it may be true that this policy of political liberalization unleashed nationalist forces, this is mainly so because it shaped the opportunity for ethnic tensions to be articulated. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Advisor to American President James Carter from 1979 to 1981, was one of the first to point this out when he argued that Gorbachev’s reforms “created an opportunity for long-suppressed national grievances to surface” (Brzezinski, 1989: 2).

Furthermore, with regard to the influence of the economic decline on the break-up of the Soviet Union, it should be noted that, without the perceived Muslim threat as a result of the 1979 census, the economic decline would have been much less problematic and vice versa. As explained by Lapidus, the declining rates of economic growth made the management of ethnic relations within the Soviet Union more difficult, as they increased competition over the allocation of limited resources among the different republics (Lapidus 1984: 573). Moscow had been pursuing a redistributive policy in which the poorer republics received transfer payments for years (Bahry, 1987; White, 1982), but with the sharp economic decline, starting in the 1970s and continuing into the 1980s, the critique on this policy intensified. A typical critique on the Soviet Union’s budget policy
among Russians was that “not once in the entire existence of the Soviet state has the Russian republic benefited by a subsidy from the all-Union budget, as several other republics have” (Lapidus, 1984: 574). From this view, the Russian people thus saw themselves as the victims rather than the beneficiaries of the Soviet multinational empire. In other words, Brooks and Wolforth identify economic decline as the root of the Soviet Union’s break-up, but a strong case can be made that it was the interaction of economic factors with demographic shifts within the Soviet Union that better explains this break-up.

Furthermore, these internal dynamics and concerns were compounded by events in the region and beyond: civil war in Afghanistan that led to the overthrow of the secular communist regime and revolution in Iran that ushered in a religiously inspired Islamic regime. From Moscow’s perspective, religion, and Islam in particular, came to be perceived as a threat to its internal stability, and in relation to its influence along its southern periphery.

Religion as realpolitik thus became a matter of utmost concern as Muslims and Islam were seen to be achieving demographic dominance within the Union and political dominance beyond it, as is evidenced by Moscow’s reactions and role in Afghanistan and Iran.

**Afghanistan and regional politics**

On 27 April 1978, the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) took control of the government. Moscow was quick to show its support to the communist government and signed a friendship treaty with the Kabul regime on 5 December 1978. Despite this treaty, Moscow was hesitant to become directly involved when confronted with a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. The PDPA leaders requested direct military support to fight the Mujahideen insurgency in the provincial city of Herat in spring of 1979, but as follows from records of internal Kremlin deliberations, the Politburo refused. Commenting on the prospects for a possible military intervention, KGB chairman Yuri Andropov stated at a Politburo meeting on 18 March 1979 that “we can suppress a revolution in Afghanistan only with the aid of our bayonets, but that is for us entirely inadmissible [sic.] We cannot take such a risk” (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2001: 70–71). Highlighting the implications of an intervention with regard to the Soviet Union’s international relations, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko stated that military intervention in Afghanistan would entail a huge risk: “And all that we have done in recent years with such effort in terms of a détente in international tensions, arms reductions, and much more—all that would be thrown back. … All the nonaligned countries will be against us. In a word, serious consequences are to be expected from such an action” (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2001: 71).

The Soviet leadership was thus well aware of the possible consequences of military intervention in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, despite numerous failed requests from the Afghan leadership to gain Soviet military support (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2001: 70–75), the Politburo finally gave its approval to intervention in order to keep the communist regime in power. The initial deployment of the 40th Army began on 24 December 1979.

At the heart of the Soviet leaders’ decision to deploy the Red Army in Afghanistan was a perceived Muslim threat. Evidence for this can be found in the heavy emphasis on the Islamic nature of the insurgency in Afghanistan in the minutes of internal Politburo deliberations. The Cold War International History Project Bulletin concludes that “the weight of the evidence in the documents that have become available suggests that Moscow’s considerations were more influenced by fear of losing Afghanistan to Islamic radicalism than by hopes of using the country as a military springboard to dominate the region” (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2001: 75). For instance, on 17 March 1979, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Alexei Kosygin, reflected on the nature of the enemy in Afghanistan: “With whom will it be necessary for us to fight in the event
it becomes necessary to deploy troops—who will it be that rises against the present leadership of Afghanistan? They are all Mohammedans, people of one belief, and their faith is sufficiently strong that they can close ranks on that basis” (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2001: 139). Similarly, in a Politburo document, dated 1 April 1979, it was stated that the reactionary forces in Afghanistan were a product of a “spark of religious fanaticism all around the Muslim East” (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2001: 68).

The Soviet leaders further believed that regime change in Kabul would drastically change regional dynamics. Before 1978, the Middle East was perceived as relatively stable area, in which the countries were on friendly terms with the Soviet Union or at least were indifferent to fate of the Soviet Muslims. As Bennigsen and Broxup put it, “the Muslim world abroad was very remote”, which meant that “Soviet Muslims could not be reached by any alien ideology, any models of subversion or any appeal to resist the Russians” (Bennigsen and Broxup, 1983: 108). Yet, the insurgency in Afghanistan destabilized a substantial part of the southern border, which led to the perception that the dynamics of the Afghan war could have unpredictable and negative consequences for the Soviet Union. In essence, Afghanistan was thus seen as having changed into “an area from which various subversive and radical ideologies may penetrate and contaminate Soviet Islam” (Bennigsen and Broxup, 1983: 109). This explains why then Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, and other members of the Politburo, believed that “under no circumstances may we lose Afghanistan” (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2001: 137).

As Russians and Slavs in the Red Army lacked the knowledge of local circumstances and languages, Moscow was forced to send many Central Asian Muslims to Afghanistan—including among others Uzbek, Tajik and Turkmen—many of whom shared ethno-linguistic ties with the local population (Bennigsen and Broxup, 1983: 112; Zhou, 2012). Although exact numbers remain elusive, it has been estimated that the Central Asian soldiers formed between as few as 30% and as many as 90% of the initial Soviet intervention force (Bennigsen and Broxup, 1983: 113; Zhou, 2012: 316). A major disadvantage, however, associated with so many soldiers from Central Asia within the Red Army related to language problems internally. Around 90% of the draftees from rural areas in the Central Asian Republics did not speak Russian, owing to both an inability and a reluctance to learn to speak the language (Alexiev, 1988: 41). As a result, there were instances in which army commanders had to rely on translators to provide their troops with orders, which decreased the effectiveness of such forces (Alexiev, 1988; Gaidar, 2007: 174).

In addition to these language problems, the loyalty of the Central Asian soldiers created anxiety among the Soviet leadership. The Soviet soldiers of Afghan ethnicities could interact with the native Muslim population with almost no Army control, which resulted in friendly relations with the local population, but crucially in some instances also with the Afghan resistance. One telling sign of this interaction was the emergence of a black market in Korans. On top of that, some Central Asian soldiers proved ineffective in fighting the Mujahideen. In January and February 1980, reports emerged of soldiers deserting to join the Afghan resistance (Bennigsen and Broxup, 1983: 113; Zhou, 2012: 321). Other Central Asian soldiers deliberately aimed their rifles inaccurately when they engaged in fire fights with the Mujahideen (Szporluk, 1997: 170; Zhou, 2012: 320). Ghafoor Yussofzai, an Afghan Mujahid, recalls that Central Asian soldiers occasionally left packages with ammunition and weapons for the Afghan opposition (Collins, 1984).

Although the majority of the Soviet soldiers from the Central Asian republics proved to be loyal to the Soviet Union, fears about the Central Asian troops forming a fifth column within the Red Army increased among the Soviet leadership, or at a minimum, doubts started to arise about the effectiveness of Central Asian soldiers. Vladimir Kuzichkin, a Soviet KGB major who defected to the West, stated that Central Asian soldiers “showed little interest in fighting their neighbors” and that “in no time at all they were black-marketeering (including selling army equipment), buying
As a result, many Central Asian soldiers were removed from active combat duties while stationed in Afghanistan (Nahaylo, 1987: 15; Reuveny and Prakash, 1999: 700). In addition, military leaders within the Soviet army started scaling down the number of Central Asian soldiers in Afghanistan from February 1980 onwards, replacing them with ethnic Russians and Ukrainians (Bennigsen and Broxup, 1983: 113; Szporluk, 1997: 169; Zhou, 2012: 316–319).

The Muslim insurgency in Afghanistan, as well as the problems surrounding the deployment of Central Asian troops in Afghanistan, thus increased fears of the Muslim threat among the Soviet leaders. Central Asians accounted for 23.5% of the draft-age cohorts in 1980. Moreover, the Soviet leadership was aware that this share would only grow, since generations of boys that would be within the draft age range in 1995 had already been born between 1962 and 1977. Indeed, it was estimated that Central Asians would account for 28.7% of the draft cohort in 1995 (Alexiev and Wimbush, 1983: 10; Brunner, 1981). Bennigsen and Broxup described this trend as the yellowing of the Red Army (Bennigsen and Broxup 1983: 131–135). This created a dilemma for the Soviet leadership, since as Weber and Goodman (1988: 287) point out, “the prospect of having to rely on troops whose loyalty is suspect in future military interventions cannot be comforting”.

Furthermore, once the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan, Moscow became increasingly worried about a possible backlash against the Afghan war in Central Asia. Many Central Asians perceived the war as a “Russian war being fought by Central Asians against other Central Asians” (Reuveny and Prakash, 1999: 704). Consequently, several protests against the war took place Central Asian republics, including violent protests in Tajikistan in 1982, in Armenia in May 1985, and in Astrakhan in June 1985 (Reuveny and Prakash, 1999: 704; Rywkin, 1990: 149–151). Draft resistance also became more prevalent in the Central Asian republics (Nahaylo, 1987: 13–15). Commenting on the numerous Tajiks being prosecuted for draft-dodging in December 1987, the local KGB Chief identified the Tajik radical Muslims as the main cause and labeled them as agents of the enemy from Afghanistan (Rigby, 1991: 146).

Although it is difficult to determine the extent to which the Soviet–Afghan war played a role in Islamic radicalization in Central Asia, Gorbachev’s anti-Islamic strategy aimed at strengthening central control suggests that the possibility of Soviet “Muslim” soldiers colluding with the Mujahideen and/or undermining the Soviet regime once they returned home was a matter of real concern to the Soviet leadership (Rywkin, 1990: 150; Tazmini, 2001: 66). The KGB stepped up its efforts to counter ideological subversion from abroad aimed at bringing the “flame of Islamic revival” to the Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union (Bennigsen, 1982; Broxup, 1983; Nahaylo, 1987: 575). A significant change took place in the nature in the style of the Central Asian Press in 1980. Two themes in particular were emphasized: the Basmachis revolt7 and the KGB, which, according to Bennigsen and Broxup, signaled that the Soviet Union had beaten the Central Asian republics before, and if necessary, would do so again (Bennigsen and Broxup, 1983: 114–115). Furthermore, the anti-Islamic strategies also affected local politics within the Central Asian republics. Wide-scale political purges in Central Asian republics took place during the 1980s in which ethnic Russians became the new appointees (Reuveny and Prakash, 1999: 704). This “parachuting” of Russian cadres into a range of strategic control positions reflected Moscow’s distrust regarding the Central Asian party cadres (Rywkin, 1990: 151). For instance, Genadii Koblin was appointed as the first secretary of the party in Kazakhstan in late 1986, leading to riots. Similarly, purges resulted in Russians holding a majority of seats in the Bureau of the party of Central Committee in Uzbekistan by the end of 1986 (Rywkin, 1990: 151).

As if events in Afghanistan were not enough to increase alarm over a feared increase in the influence of Islam and Muslim populations within the USSR, the religious revolution in Iran
heightened this anxiety and fear even more. Not only were internal, domestic dynamics deemed to be at risk, but also regional and international balances of power and influence.

**Iran and global politics**

The 1979 Iranian Revolution should have been a joyful event for the Soviet Union. As a crucial ally of the USA, the Soviet Union’s main rival, the Shah’s fall from power in Iran could have ushered in an era of enhanced Soviet influence in the Middle East. Instead, it was not Soviet influence but anxiety that increased. Why? Because Iran’s revolution and its Islamist ideology radically opposed Soviet ideology and, more to the point, Soviet interests. Iran under a revolutionary regime came to be seen as a greater threat to the Soviet Union than it had been under a modernizing American ally.

Whereas before the revolution, Iran had been a relatively known entity with interests that could be anticipated and engaged, now all bets were off. Iran was suddenly an oil-rich, radically religious, populous and educated state that was situated geopolitically at the very most sensitive area of the Soviet Union: its southern flank. The revolution also came at a time of serious concern about the relatively rapid increase in populations of non-white and nominally “Muslim” Soviets in Soviet Central Asia. These Soviet republics—including Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan—were now sharing a physical border with a radicalized Islamic theocracy.

According to Soviet Interior Ministry archival material, in August 1979 a secret meeting was held in Tehran to address issues related to Iran’s security. The meeting, which was recorded by the Soviet intelligence services, included representatives from Iran’s top political and security organs, including the Prime Minister’s office, the Ministries of Foreign and Internal Affairs, the Intelligence and Operational Administrations of the General Staff, and Gendarme and Police Administrations of the General Staff. At the top of the list of Interior Ministry concerns following the meeting was discussion of the implication of an Islamic victory in Iran and its influence in the “Moslem republics in the USSR” (Westad, 2013 [1979]). They then went onto to discuss how they might continue their own ideological struggle by supporting leftists in Iran and by proactively weakening the Islamic regime.

For the Soviets, the importance of religion to the Iranian Revolution therefore cannot be underestimated. As Charles Kurzman states: “The revolutionaries did not draw as much on culture so much as redraw it” (Kurzman, 2004: 165). To maximize the benefits that an Islamic base would bring to his revolution, the leader of the movement, Ayatollah Khomeini, would have been forced to consider how and where Islam existed in Iranian society and beyond it. More specifically, he would have had to ask which traditions, manifestations of religious belief, and religiously based networks would be the most valuable for his intended purposes: forming a strong opposition movement, overthrowing the Shah’s regime, and ensuring that power ultimately rested with him. As Sciolino notes:

More than being a brilliant theoretician of revolution, Khomeini had been smiled on by circumstance. Iranians of all classes and levels of religiosity had been searching for change. In that atmosphere, he became all things to all revolutionaries: a democrat to the liberal nationalists and the intellectuals, a devout man of God to the clerics, a believer in free trade to the bazaar merchants, a standard-bearer of economic justice to the leftists and workers, a protector of family values to fathers and mothers, a savior to the nation. (Sciolino, 2000: 64)

The Soviets, having themselves come to power as revolutionaries, were wary of what was happening in Iran as the religious revolutionaries were consolidating control of the revolution. Nevertheless
at the start of the revolution, the official and public position from the Kremlin was one of support. For example, in his 2 March election speech of 1979, one month after Khomeini’s return to Iran, Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev welcomed “the victory of the revolution which put an end to the despotic oppressive regime” (as quoted in Yodfat, 1984: 54) and expressed his hope for cordial relations between Moscow and Tehran.

By virtually all accounts, however, the success of the Islamic Revolution was unexpected. This explains why at the early stages the Soviets attempted to balance concerns about continued American influence in Iran and its trepidation about an Islamic theocracy. Soviet strategy initially was to hedge its bets regardless of which faction came to control Tehran. It was enough that the emerging regime was against the Shah (and therefore against American interests and influence in the region). The religious dimensions were discounted or ignored altogether.

Although Moscow attempted to influence Iranians politics, Khomeini rejected all overtures, preferring a policy of “neither East nor West”, eventually describing the Soviet Union as no less satanic than was the USA (Yodfat, 1984: 71). Given the recent history of foreign meddling in Iranian affairs, this is not surprising. Not only was the USSR suspected of provoking ethnic minorities along Iran’s borders, in particular the Kurds (Yodfat, 1984: 120–122), but it also had a history of supporting leftists throughout the region, including in Iran (e.g. bolstering the leftist Tudeh party). Late in 1979, the USSR intervened in neighboring Afghanistan to support atheist communists there.

Given this history, it is unsurprising that the two regimes, both espousing opposing revolutionary ideologies—one based on great sacrifice to attain material paradise on earth (communism) and the other based on great sacrifice to attain spiritual paradise beyond earth (Shia Islam)—should find themselves unalterably opposed.

This situation was compounded by the fact that, as fundamentally revolutionary regimes, both ideologies were necessarily expansionist. So although each side tried to persuade the other that its actions were not intended to influence the internal affairs of the other, neither believed the other. Iran witnessed Soviet support of communists and minorities within its own borders and intervention in neighboring Afghanistan. From a Soviet perspective, if an Islamic revolution could happen in Tehran, why could it not happen in Moscow, or Dushanbe? Moscow grew increasingly wary about developments in Iran.

Relations deteriorated further following the Iran–Iraq war, a war started by Iraq on 22 September 1980. The policy of the USSR during the Iran–Iraq war shifted from one of neutrality, in which Moscow tried not to take sides—including taking measures to negotiate a settlement between the two countries—to eventually one of providing large-scale support to Iraq, which had been a traditional ally of the USSR.9 The problem was that the USSR was trying to balance its interests, not wanting to lose its influence in Iraq, yet also trying to establish some sort of relationship with Iran.

Moscow had held out hope that it could win Iran over as an ally. The problem was that Iran was not interested. It held from the start that Moscow should condemn Iraq’s invasion and not supply Iraq with any (further) support that might be used in the war (Yodfat, 1984: 92). Iran’s commitment to continue the war until Iraq was defeated meant that any Soviet efforts fell on deaf Iranian ears. Moscow realized that it could not maintain neutrality with such a hostile Iran and at the same time sustain its alliance with Iraq. Furthermore, Moscow realized that a victorious Iran would then be in a position to export its revolution. After a series of military gains by Iran, the Soviet Union increased its aid to Iraq, helping Iraq to bring the war to an end in August 1988.

So, although the Soviets initially tried a policy of friendship and then neutrality, they became increasingly alarmed by Iranian policy and revolutionary fervor. Whereas perhaps the greatest and first jolt suffered by the new Russian revolutionaries in 1917 had been accommodating themselves to the states system (Marxism and anarchism shared a detestation of “the state” as a form of
Toft

political association, and each had a different strategy for bringing about its demise), the Iranians, newly minted revolutionaries, were still far from making these same accommodations. There were fears in Moscow that Iran would foster Islamic revolutions throughout the Soviet Union, particularly in Central Asia. Such fears were not unwarranted: beyond Iran’s wanton disregard for international law demonstrated in the ongoing US Embassy hostage crisis, Iran had begun making direct overtures to the region’s nominally “Muslim” republics, bypassing Moscow. These included a proposal to set up a consulate in Dushanbe.

For the most part, Khomeini’s actions and words provided evidence that he indeed wished “to project his Islamic Revolution beyond the frontiers of Iran” (Kepel, 2002: 127). Whether the rulers of post-1979 Iran had truly achieved their desired status of the “standard bearers of Islam” (Kepel, 2002: 119) or not, there is no denying that the revolution has had its legacy. That movement was immensely influential in both Shia and Sunni circles, all of whom admired Iran’s achievement in one way or another: “During the decade following the Iranian Revolution, Shia politics in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, and Lebanon began to stir” (Nasr, 2006: 139).

Indeed, one of the revolution’s most significant effects has had to do with Islam more broadly and its influence in modern local, regional and in particular global politics. Specifically, in situations of political activism where a source of common identity is required, Islam has become more important than other factors, such as nationalism (Kepel, 2002: 118). As scholars such as Mark Juergensmeyer argue (2008: 47), the fact that the Islamic Revolution evolved and took place in Iran does not preclude it from being “the paradigm for religious revolution” more generally (Juergensmeyer, 2008: 47).

Regardless of how different sections of the Muslim population interpreted the revolution, it was clear that the Soviet regime regarded Iranian overtures towards its Muslim frontier with great anxiety. Why? The answer is threefold.

First, Soviet authorities tended to regard its Muslim populations as an undifferentiated whole, not as Sunni or Shia. Relatedly, because of Soviet control of religion and faith, many nominal Muslims within the Soviet Union did not themselves have a sophisticated understanding of the nuances of “their” faith. To be sure, Soviet leaders were well aware of some important ethnic differences between Uzbeks, Tajiks and other peoples of Central Asia. Yet, as noted by Karklins, while in the Caucasian and the Baltic nations ethnic identity was mostly linked to language and culture, in Central Asia identity was more affected by the Islamic way of life (Karklins, 1986: 56). Moreover, this common Muslim identity was closely intertwined with the nationality issue, which worried the Soviet leadership (Carrère d’Encausse, 1979: 243).

Second, the form of Islam that Iran exported, including to Central Asia, was ecumenical, designed to appeal to all Muslims—“Shi’ah-Lite”—a faith of the “oppressed” (Bar, 2009). Such an idea had once undergirded communist and Bolshevik ideology, and now, just over 60 years after the Bolshevik revolution established a “temporary” dictatorship of the (white, Slavic, atheist or Orthodox) proletariat, that ecumenical theology threatened to compete with communism in regions with lots of non-white young males whose great grandfathers had been Muslims but who had been forbidden to pray and discriminated against in education and employment for three generations.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, just as Islam emerged as the most acceptable basis of authority in Iran, the feeling in Moscow was that it could emerge as such in Muslim areas of the Soviet Union. The regime understood that political authority requires legitimacy and an ideological architecture to underpin that legitimacy. Although the Soviet Union at this point in its development was willing to use force to put down rebellion, persuasion and compliance were always used as the regime’s first choice. Moreover, even when deployed, the Soviets understood that force could not be sustained for long or over vast expanses without doing harm to the regime itself. The
fear in Soviet circles was therefore understandable. Just as in Iran, the key concern was this: what if Islam became the basis of legitimacy, paving the way for alternative forms of political authority in the region?

In an analysis of the broader implications of the revolution in Iran, Bernard Lewis nicely summarizes how and why the Iranian Revolution was such a threat to political regimes:

Islam, as recent events have demonstrated again and again, provides the most effective system of symbols—one might say of slogans, though no derogatory sense is meant—for mobilizing public opinion, for arousing the people in defense of a regime that is perceived as possessing the necessary legitimacy, or against a regime that is perceived as lacking that legitimacy, in other words, as not being Islamic. (Lewis, 1988)

So, although initially the Soviets did try to craft a policy of friendship and then neutrality, such a contradictory policy in such a hostile neighborhood could never succeed, especially with a hostile and revolutionary partner. Eventually Iran came to be seen as a direct threat to the Soviet regime. “Whereas the Soviets might welcome Iranian activities that led to the destabilization of Western-oriented countries in the Persian Gulf, they took quite a different view of Iranian support for the Muslim revolt in Afghanistan. They also considered Iranian appeals to Soviet Muslims for an Islam revival as being directed against them” (Yodfat, 1984: 106).

Although Iranian religious appeals, particularly to Soviet Muslims, were not the only factor in straining relations—global and regional power dynamics and the Soviets own ideology were also key—they contributed to a complex dynamic that impeded the ability of both sides to normalize relations.

Religion, realpolitik and the demographic demise of the USSR

This article has advanced the argument that, along with overextension arguments—imperial over-expansion and economic overextension—and arguments about the related and unintended consequences of Gorbachev’s reforms, the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics can be best understood through the lens of demographic dynamics and the 1979 census. If the causes were interrelated, the census of 1979 would be the first and perhaps the biggest. It was Soviet concern over a future with fewer Slavic young men and more Central Asian young men, combined with religiously inspired insurgency in Afghanistan and revolution in Iran, that broke the camel’s back. Once engaged in Afghanistan, for example, where resistance to communist authority in Kabul was framed in starkly religious terms, the Soviets found themselves in a war they did not want against an adversary poised to claim God’s favor from a nominally impossible victory against a superpower. The implications for future control of the Central Asian republics from Moscow were stark: if the Mujahideen could defeat Moscow in Afghanistan, then why should they not, in say, Dushanbe, renegotiate our own relationship? The Soviet leadership under Brezhnev was hardly unaware of the precedent-setting implications of failure to preserve the communists in Kabul, but what has been less understood is that the real driver was not what the “West” would think, nor what struggling “revolutionary comrades” in Africa, East Asia and Latin America might take away from a Soviet failure, but rather what “Muslims” in Soviet Central Asia would take away in terms of precedent (Toft, 2003).

So while it is true that the Soviet economy would probably have failed anyway, the strain of the war in Afghanistan dramatically intensified and accelerated that failure. That intervention was made to seem all the more necessary by the 1979 census. In sum, it was the census that informed part of the political calculations that led to intervention, and that then sustained and escalated that
“limited” intervention into a decade-long war. The costs of that war would not only be financial, but as “at risk” Central Asian military units were rotated out of Afghanistan to be replaced by Slavic units from Belarus and Ukraine (for example), the toll in white young men came to dominate the casualty lists of the war. Although the exact number of Soviet casualties is debated, it is clear that ethnic Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians accounted for the majority of the total causalities. True, the number of causalities in Afghanistan was tiny as compared with the Second World War, but the near-decade-long toll would mean thousands of Slavic soldiers returning home who would be even less capable to stand as fathers or workers. The demographic impact of the war would therefore be in the wrong direction.

Iran represented a broader threat, not only as a revolutionary regime that demonstrated that Islam could form the ideological basis of revolution, but also by leading to a shift in influence and power in the region. Religion and realpolitik united in ways that led to further consternation and anxiety in Moscow. Fears of Muslim domination from within were now augmented by insurgency and revolution abroad.

Conclusion

The Soviet Union was one of the most important and powerful states in the history of the world. In 1991 it formally ceased to exist. It was not conquered from without, its problems were primarily internal. It was one problem in particular that contributed to the decline that led to the state’s disintegration as and when it happened.

The census of 1979 revealed that peoples with different faiths, even within a nominally atheist state, were having babies at dramatically different rates. The history of the Soviet Union (and to some extent the Russian Empire that preceded it) was always marked by a fundamental local insecurity redeemed by two things: space (the country was the largest in the world in terms of area) and a healthy population of young males (it could always mobilize large numbers of soldiers as compared with rivals). The 1979 census gave empirical teeth to arguments that all this was about to change. First, it implied that faith mattered and gave lie to the notion of cultural convergence so long sought by Soviet social policy. Second, its publication at a time when radical religious actors were catalyzing resistance to communist authority in Afghanistan, and preparing to launch a transnational Islamic revolution from Iran, made the “Muslim” component of Central Asian fecundity a grave contemporary threat.

The Soviet Union had already been falling behind its Western rivals in terms of innovation and economic productivity, but threshold effects might have been delayed a generation had not the intervention in Afghanistan been considered vital. Once launched, and later escalated, the economic burden—which incidentally catapulted Mikhail Gorbachev to the seat of Soviet power—proved imminently unsustainable. This created overextension and overexpansion from the inside: a hollowing out. Gorbachev’s leadership and reforms might have been unnecessary (or instituted much more gradually) had it not been for the alarm provoked by the census, the Iranian Revolution, and the imminent destruction of Kabul’s government at the hands of Afghan and Pakistani Mujahideen. 1979, in other words, was the turning point.

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Notes

1. For a perspective that holds that the aggressive foreign policy of the Soviet Union was rational and aimed at state survival, see Mearsheimer (2001).
2. The last All-Union census was conducted in 1989, just as the state was dissolving.
3. The figures on which Feshbach relies had been published in the Vestnik statistiki in June 1980.
4. The first data for more than one nationality appeared in the Estonian newspaper Rahva Hddl on 19 September 1989, but Soviet leaders were again restrained in what they officially published.
5. For a contrary argument see, Beissinger (2002). He makes the case that the more numerous Muslims were not responsible for the collapse of the USSR but the smaller Baltic nationalities.
6. Zhou points out that a very limited number of Central Asian soldiers stationed in Afghanistan returned home with the intention of establishing an Islamic state (Zhou, 2012: 325).
7. This refers to an insurrection that began in Central Asia against Soviet rule in 1917 that was eventually suppressed in 1926.
8. Empirically, it now appears that Soviet fear of Iran directly exporting the revolution was unfounded in that the ideas behind the revolution did not have much traction beyond Iran (an exception is Hizbollah in Lebanon). In addition, there is little evidence supporting the idea of “a covert parallel radical religious foreign policy” in Iran. See Herzig (1995).
9. The two had been allies since 1958, solidifying that relationship through the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1972, which committed them to defend the other from threats and not enter into any hostile alignments.

References


