



# The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union

*Ronald Grigor Suny*

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How could so many have been so wrong about the internal dynamics of the Soviet state and society? Why did almost no one foresee the possibility of a democratic reform initiated from the very top of the Communist party? Much of Sovietological analysis had been built on a conviction that the nature of totalitarianism precluded the kind of reform initiated by Gorbachev. Distinguished historians reminded us that Russian political culture was so deeply authoritarian that an offshoot as distinctively Western as political pluralism could not appear. The West initially responded to the changes in the Soviet Union with disbelief and deep suspicion of the sincerity of the initiatives. Each turn of events, each incident of hesitation or of backsliding, seemed to confirm those suspicions. Suspicion was replaced by the conviction that the Gorbachev reforms must fail. But the projected reasons for failure changed over time. Few understood, until it was overwhelmingly clear to all, that besides chronic economic woes, the greatest threat to both the Soviet state and its potential for reform would be the emergence of mass nationalist movements.

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