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EMBASSY MOSCOW, 1987-1991:
Watching an Empire Self-Destruct

By Jack F. Matlock, Jr.

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One of the many unfounded myths about the collapse of the Soviet Union is that the American government was taken by surprise. Not so! American Embassy Moscow advised Washington 18 months before the Russian tricolor was raised over the Kremlin that contingency plans should be laid for that eventuality. And in the year and a half that followed that report — the July 1990 embassy cable, "Looking into the Abyss: The Possible Collapse of the Soviet Union and What We Should Be Doing About It" — the embassy carefully reported the stages of unraveling, based on extensive contacts with government officials and opposition leaders on the one hand and, on the other, the insights derived from deepening involvement with the broader public, Russian and non-Russian alike, in and out of the capital.

Though it conflicted with prevailing opinion in Washington, the embassy's July 1990 message was not a bolt out of the blue. We had been reporting on the rise of nationalist movements in many Soviet republics, the growing problems in the economy, the weakening of Communist-Party control over the country, and competition and disarray among supporters of reform and within the Communist Party itself.

Moreover, Embassy Moscow and its associated posts covered political and economic developments in the Soviet Union during the years leading up to and through the breakup without the assistance of a single clandestine source. By 1987, every "human intelligence" source in the Soviet Union had been exposed to the KGB, not through lack of security at Embassy Moscow, as many in Washington once suspected, but — as we learned years later — by moles in the CIA (Aldrich Ames) and the FBI (Robert Hanssen). The most serious security lapses by far occurred in Washington, not in Moscow.

As for the embassy, we got our information the old-fashioned way, going out on the street, to people's offices and into society, traveling as much as possible out of the capital, talking and listening to people, using our eyes, ears, voices and — not least — our wits.

Opening Up

Before 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power as general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Soviet authorities had, for decades, attempted to isolate the American embassy in Moscow from normal contact with Soviet citizens — and also with Soviet officials other than those specifically delegated to deal with the embassy. Some American administrations, particularly those of Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, unwisely facilitated Soviet efforts to isolate the embassy by doing most of its business through the Soviet ambassador in Washington.

In his fascinating *Tchaikovsky 19, A Diplomatic Life Behind the Iron Curtain,* retired FSO Robert Ober describes the atmosphere in the embassy in the mid-1980s and previously. If these conditions had persisted, the embassy's ability to follow and interpret developments in a vast empire convulsed by change would have been crippled.

Fortunately, developments encouraged by U.S. policy and supported by Gorbachev altered the environment in which Embassy Moscow operated. From 1987, Soviet society was gradually but rapidly opened to contacts with the outside world. Equally important, Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush and Secretaries of State George Shultz and James A. Baker III managed to establish trusted personal relationships with Gorbachev and Foreign Ministers Eduard Shevardnadze and Alexander Bessmertnykh. Both American and Soviet leaders encouraged their subordinates to follow suit and work out the problems brought on by the Cold War. In the late 1980s, a win-win spirit rapidly replaced the destructive "zero-sum" attitude that had burdened negotiations during most of the Cold War.

In the summer of 1989, separate groups of Lithuanians, Estonians and Latvians made appointments with me to explain their plans for a restoration of the independence Stalin had extinguished as World War II began. The fact that they could do so with impunity was clear evidence that the Soviet authorities had greatly eased restrictions on contact with foreign diplomats. Before Gorbachev's reforms, such behavior would have been considered tantamount to treason and punished accordingly.

When the Soviet government refused their demands for more autonomy, the newly elected Baltic leaders intensified the pressure for their own independence and began to support independence movements in the other non-Russian union republics. Resistance to Communist rule from Moscow was not dependent on Baltic inspiration, however, but arose spontaneously, particularly in those areas in western Ukraine and Moldova seized by Stalin following the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, and in the South Caucasus.

The Baltic Independence Push

By 1990, Consul General Richard Miles in Leningrad (as Saint Petersburg was then known) maintained an almost continuous presence in Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius, aided by Embassy Moscow and U.S. embassies in nearby Scandinavia. (One of the key officers in this effort, Latvian-speaking FSO Ints Silins, subsequently became American ambassador to Latvia.) An advance party to open a consulate general was sent to Kiev (now known as Kyiv) and thus able to keep abreast of developments there and visit Moscow frequently to file reports.

Embassy Moscow's political and economic reporting officers were given assignments to follow developments in specific non-Russian republics. Opposition leaders usually knew who on the embassy staff had responsibility for their republic and would frequently alert our diplomats to planned demonstrations and other significant events. All reporting officers in

Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev spoke and understood Russian. Some were competent in a second language used in the Soviet Union, such as Latvian, Ukrainian, Armenian, Uzbek or Tajik. This was an invaluable asset in developing rapport with persons of those nationalities even though most were fluent in Russian.

In March 1990 the decision of the Lithuanian parliament to declare a restoration of the country's independence brought the USSR close to crisis. Foreign Minister Shevardnadze met with me privately on the eve of that decision in an effort to persuade the Lithuanians to delay their decision until Gorbachev was secure in the newly created office of president. He did not seek an abandonment of the declaration, but only a delay of 10 days or so. When I informed him the following day that the Lithuanians were determined to proceed immediately, he remarked, as he saw me out of his office, "If I see a dictatorship coming, I will resign. I will not be part of a government with blood on its hands." The Lithuanian declaration proceeded, as did Gorbachev's appointment to the post of president.

Important as the independence movements in the three Baltic republics were, it was not their activities, or the growing assertiveness by nationalists in other non-Russian republics, that persuaded us to advise Washington that the Soviet Union could collapse. In 1989 the world had witnessed the slaughter of protesters in Tiananmen Square by the Chinese Communist leaders. And the Soviet government still had the same capability to crush any opposition if there were a decision at the top to do so.

Although by 1990 we in the embassy were convinced that Gorbachev would make every effort to avoid violence — any widespread application would reverse his entire policy of perestroika (restructuring) — we could not be sure that he would not be suddenly removed from power, as one of his predecessors, Nikita Khrushchev, had been in 1964.

The Beginning of the End

What persuaded us to alert Washington to the possibility that the hitherto unthinkable might happen was the development of separatist opinion in the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic, the largest and most populous of the 15 union republics. By the summer of 1990, we found more and more Russian leaders referring to the non-Russian republics as a burden and speaking of a future in which the Soviet Union would resemble the European Union, not a unitary state. In effect, many key Russian leaders viewed the Soviet Union as a *communist* empire, not a Russian empire. Without strong Russian political support for preservation of the Soviet Union, it was difficult to see how Gorbachev could continue his reforms and keep the country together.

Embassy Moscow's political counselor, Raymond Smith, drafted the July 1990 warning message, with the subject line: "Looking into the Abyss: The Possible Collapse of the Soviet Union and What We Should Be Doing About It." (This cable, 90 Moscow 23603 of July 13, 1990, originally Secret/Exdis, is now declassified. Smith has used it and other cables from Embassy Moscow as examples in his valuable book on the art of political reporting, *The Craft of Political Analysis for Diplomats*, Potomac Books, 2011.)

We were never told directly what, if any, impact the "Abyss" message had on thinking in Washington, but I noted that the CIA circulated it. The last thing we wanted, then or later, was a formal CIA determination that a break-up of the Soviet Union was possible or likely. Such a determination would inevitably have leaked and could have precipitated a successful hard-line coup against Gorbachev. There would have been a widespread assumption that we not only desired, but had engineered the Soviet collapse.

In fact, while the U.S. government was steadfast in its support for the restoration of independence of the three Baltic countries, it was convinced that American interests, and those of the Soviet peoples themselves, would be better served by the sort of voluntary federation Gorbachev was trying to create than by the sudden independence of all union republics.

In the fall of 1990, Gorbachev made what seemed a sharp turn to the "right." (At the time, hard-line communists were considered the "right wing," a reversal of the usual left-right paradigm.) The cabinet was reshuffled to include ministers reputed to support repression and steps for economic reform stalled while the economy continued to deteriorate. There appeared to be preparations for a crack-down in the Baltic. In December 1990, Shevardnadze suddenly did resign, declaring: "a dictatorship is coming."

On the Brink

The embassy was confronted with several questions: Had Gorbachev altered his reformist agenda? If not, could he manage to keep power and resume his reforms? Would Gorbachev fend off efforts to remove him by acceding to demands to use force? Or, could his recent behavior be a feint to the right with a left hook to follow?

An attack on the television tower in Vilnius, in January 1991 left the questions open. Gorbachev immediately denied that he had authorized it, but he did nothing to punish those who perpetrated the outrage. A few days later, when I met with him privately to deliver a message from President Bush, he asked me to explain to "my friend George" that he had not changed his objectives, but that the country was on the brink of a civil war. As president, he had to do everything to avoid one, and that would require him to tack with the wind at times. And then he added that no matter what decisions Pres. Bush might make — Bush had threatened to terminate some cooperative programs if violence continued in the Baltic area — he would faithfully carry out all his previous agreements.

It was already apparent to the embassy that the KGB was feeding Gorbachev distorted and sometimes totally fabricated reports about conditions in the USSR. In 1989 and 1990 he had been convinced that the independence movements in the Baltic countries represented small minorities, while it was obvious to us that they had overwhelming support. By 1991, we could see that the KGB was fabricating "evidence" that Boris Yeltsin and the democratic leaders were planning to seize power "unconstitutionally."

Absurd as such claims were, Gorbachev seems to have taken them seriously. When specific false reports came to our attention and we informed him that they were baseless, Gorbachev would believe us rather than the KGB. Unfortunately, however, most of these reports did not come to our attention.

Events in the spring and summer of 1991 moved with kaleidoscopic rapidity and complexity. In April, there were attempts to remove Gorbachev as general secretary of the Communist Party, but he managed to repulse them. The Cable News Network at one point reported that he had resigned as CPSU general secretary. When Secretary Baker telephoned me directly for clarification, I was able to quickly correct the false information, because the embassy's political section had sources within the closed meeting.

Negotiations between Gorbachev and republic leaders would make some apparent progress, then stall. The KGB chairman, prime minister and minister of defense all thought Gorbachev was conceding too much to the republics, but key republic leaders became more and more demanding. Underneath it all a de facto independence of all the union republics was developing rapidly, most importantly in Russia. By summer, the Russian Soviet Federative

Socialist Republic had an elected president, Boris Yeltsin, while the USSR had a president who had been selected by the legislature, not the people as a whole. To make matters worse, Gorbachev and Yeltsin were acting more like sworn enemies than political leaders who understood the need to cooperate for the good of the country.

The Coup Attempt and Its Aftermath

When President Bush visited Moscow at the end of July 1991, it appeared that Gorbachev had the agreement of at least eight of the 15 Soviet republics to adhere to a new union treaty, and a date for signing was set for Aug. 21. Pres. Bush tried to support Gorbachev with a speech in Kiev on Aug. 1, in which he urged the non-Russian republics to accept Gorbachev's proposals, but whatever prospect that draft treaty might have had was shattered when a cabal of Gorbachev's most senior associates attempted to seize power on Aug. 19, 1991, while he was vacationing in the Crimea.

The identity of the conspirators should not have been a surprise to Pres. Bush or Sec. Baker, for I had sent them a message in June reporting that Moscow Mayor Gavriil Popov had asked us to inform Boris Yeltsin, then visiting Washington, that KGB Chairman Kryuchkov, Prime Minister Pavlov, Defense Minister Yazov, and parliament Chairman Lukyanov, were conspiring to take power from Gorbachev. I had been instructed to warn Gorbachev, which I tried to do without naming the individuals since we could not confirm the information, but Gorbachev failed to grasp the seriousness of his position.

The first three persons Mayor Popov named did in fact lead the junta that tried to take power August 19, 1991. Lukyanov seems to have supported their efforts but to have tried to cover his tracks by not becoming a formal member of the junta.

The Aug. 19 attempted coup failed in less than three days. The country was no longer the Soviet Union of old. Boris Yeltsin, the elected president of Russia, was able to rally Muscovites to come to Gorbachev's protection and key military units refused to attack him. I left Moscow a week before the coup attempt, having told American journalists in Moscow, in reply to a direct question, that there could be an attempt to "reverse perestroika," but if so, I thought it would fail. To the best of my recollection, none of the several dozen journalists present reported my statement even though it was on the record.

When the coup occurred, Deputy Chief of Mission (later Ambassador) James Collins was in charge of the embassy. Under his guidance, American diplomats kept constant contact with Yeltsin, who was barricaded in the Russian parliament building not far from our embassy. This access provided unique insight into the Yeltsin government's reaction to the spectacular events taking place outside that building, events that were well and thoroughly reported by Western journalists.

My successor, Robert Strauss, arrived in Moscow just after the coup attempt failed. He inherited an experienced embassy staff that had successfully embedded itself in Moscow's political and intellectual elite and had developed contacts throughout the vast empire. This proved to be an irreplaceable asset for the George H.W. Bush administration as it coped with the fallout from the disintegration of a previously hostile but by then friendly superpower.

Everyday Work Continues

So far in this account, the reader might infer that Embassy Moscow had little to do in the late Soviet period but report on the unprecedented and — for most specialists — unexpected developments in the USSR. Nothing could be further from the truth. Every section of the

embassy was inundated with what seemed an exponential increase in its workload. Scores of U.S.-Soviet negotiations were underway. At one point we counted 86 negotiations being conducted simultaneously, on topics ranging from strategic arms reductions to the safety of nuclear power plants, intellectual property rights, the sale of grain, civil airline routes, maritime boundaries in the Bering Sea and human rights abuses.

Although many negotiations were conducted by special delegations, all had to be supported by the embassy. The work of the defense attaché's office evolved from mainly intelligence collection to genuine liaison with the Soviet military and support of round-the-clock monitoring of Soviet missile facilities. The consular section was faced with a sudden flood of applications for visas of all types. Waiting lists for immigrant or refugee status reached half a million by late 1990. The number of visas issued, all of which had to be explicitly approved by Washington, went within the space of months from a few thousand a year to more than 100,000.

The embassy was involved in negotiating the final touches on the Soviet agreement to withdraw from Afghanistan and settlements regarding Cambodia, Nicaragua and Angola, as well as German unification, and the diplomacy that preceded the first Persian Gulf War. In that case, for the first time, the Soviet Union was persuaded to vote in the United Nations Security Council to authorize military action against an erstwhile ally.

With the opening of the Soviet media, embassy public affairs took on a new dimension: television appearances of Russian-speaking embassy officers and visiting Americans became almost a daily occurrence. By 1990, Spaso House, the ambassador's residence, was the locus of some 12 to 16 official functions *a week*. Some days included as many as four functions: working breakfasts, lunches, a press conference or briefing, then an evening reception or seated dinner.

In 1989 we initiated a series of "Spaso Seminars" involving American specialists discussing Soviet domestic issues ranging from demographic problems to the operation of the black market, to unanswered questions about Josef Stalin. Russian academic specialists and legislators were invited to the lectures, followed by dinner and discussion. Dr. Condoleezza Rice, then a staffer at the National Security Council, gave a well-attended lecture in Russian on the Soviet military. When the Soviet legislature was considering a law on press freedoms, we had an American lawyer specializing in first amendment rights lecture a group that included the members of the relevant Supreme Soviet committee. Subsequently, they used the arguments they had heard at Spaso House (without attribution, of course) to strengthen press freedoms in the Soviet law under consideration.

The number of official and important unofficial delegations also increased rapidly so that most embassy officers had to spend much of their time accompanying or briefing visitors. This had the advantage of bringing them into contact with Soviet officials and Soviet society, but left little time for reflective reporting. Nevertheless, the embassy's reporting officers managed not only to keep Washington promptly and accurately informed of events, but to place the reports in an interpretive context with key judgments that have stood the test of time. Workweeks of 60 and 70 hours were typical.

Extreme Working Conditions

This work would have stressed to the utmost diplomats working in a totally supportive environment, but the staff of Embassy Moscow had to operate under conditions that would have incapacitated persons less capable and dedicated. In the fall of 1986, Soviet authorities withdrew all local employees from the embassy. It took the State Department more than a year to replace the "locals" with a much smaller number of Americans; in the meantime the embassy staff

struggled without maintenance, repair and cleaning personnel, as well as assistance in unclassified clerical functions. Once the Americans arrived, however, support functions improved greatly.

Simultaneously, the embassy was prevented from completing construction of a new chancery by charges that it had been made unusable by Soviet bugging. The charges were grossly exaggerated — in fact, the plans for finishing construction would have provided a secure facility — but the issue became a political football between the House and Senate.. As a result, most embassy officers had to work in overcrowded conditions in a firetrap. In March, 1991, a fire made much of the old chancery uninhabitable for months. Key embassy operations moved into what had been planned for the garage and consular section of the new chancery.

After that, the embassy did not even have space for a desk for every reporting officer. So we tried to make virtue out of necessity by keeping the majority of officers traveling outside Moscow at any given time, at least to the degree our limited travel funds permitted. Increased in-country travel enhanced our ability to follow the rapidly deteriorating conditions throughout the country.

Although President George H.W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker had, as early as the spring of 1989, approved establishing a network of small consulates in the Soviet republics, State Department management delayed implementing the decision. (When I pressed the under secretary for management, a political appointee, in 1990 for prompt implementation of the presidential decision to open small consulates in union republics, he told me to relax. He had two (Tbilisi and Tashkent) in the *1993* budget, but he couldn't move the date up because he had to open Leipzig and Bratislava first!)

Among the capitals of union republics, only Kiev, where plans for a consulate general had been under way for more than a decade, had American diplomats in place (still as an "advance party") when the Soviet Union collapsed. At the end of December 1991 there was a sudden requirement, not for a few additional consulates, but for 14 new embassies.

Although it seemed to us that Washington (especially Congress, but at times the State Department) was not as supportive as it might have been, all agencies and officials were operating under novel conditions, with many unpredictable events and stakes about as high as stakes can get. In the end, American policy coped well with the problems and opportunities stemming from the Soviet collapse.

As for Embassy Moscow, Consulate General Leningrad and our diplomats in Kiev, we can be proud of the job they did. They supported negotiations that ended the Cold War, established productive contacts in all the 15 successor states, encouraged democratic changes in the Soviet Union, and kept the U.S. government well informed about developments and their implications. It seems clear that the American government was better informed about conditions in the Soviet Union than was President Gorbachev, the victim of tendentious and misleading intelligence about conditions in his own country.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States was by far the most respected and liked foreign country among the people of the entire former Soviet Union. In Russia alone, approval ratings of the United States in opinion polls ran above 80 percent. Many events and factors contributed to this, but Embassy Moscow's outreach was not the least of them.