INTRODUCTION
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POLITICAL surprise provides a double stimulus for social scientists. An unexpected regime change, an unanticipated revolution—indeed, any political event that is both dramatic and unforeseen—forces us to analyze not just the origins of the change itself but the origins of our own amazement. The political surprises that emerged in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s have, accordingly, compelled us to ask not simply why events unfolded as they did but why our predictive theories left us unprepared. The five essays collected here address both of these questions and therefore offer insights about both politics and scholarship.

Whether shared or conflicting, the insights of these authors are not the product of editorial orchestration. With the exception of David Laitin’s review article, none of these essays was commissioned. Each was written independently (though more or less simultaneously) as an individual response to the dramatic changes in what used to be called the Soviet bloc. This special issue of World Politics thus emerged quite naturally from special events.

Although each author fastens on a different piece of the intellectual puzzle, all of the essays collected here offer explanations for the disintegration of communist rule. Timur Kuran and Giuseppe Di Palma focus on what the former calls the East European Revolution; Russell Bova and David Laitin focus on liberalization in the Soviet Union; and Andrew Janos focuses on the dynamics of political change in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and China.

How do they explain the challenges and changes we have found so surprising? Kuran reminds us that any “mass uprising results from multitudes of individual choices” (p. 16); accordingly, his argument derives from a focus on the individual citizen. He cautions that individual choices are always a complex amalgam of observable public preferences and hidden private preferences. Scholars, government officials, even opposition leaders are inevitably surprised by revolutions because they have little insight into what people’s private preferences really are. Motivated by fear and, to a lesser extent, ignorance, most oppressed people engage in what Kuran calls “preference falsification.” They hide their opposition to the government and live a lie, simply to live in peace.

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Revolutions break out only when living a lie becomes intolerable or unnecessary. In the first case, citizens act against the state because their hostility to the existing order has grown so intense that it overpowers their fear of retribution. In the second case, it is the weight of fear itself that changes. After a few brave individuals dare to act on their private preferences and survive, lying seems less necessary and thousands of citizens, finally able to be true to themselves, jump on the revolutionary bandwagon.

What causes an individual’s revolutionary threshold to change? Answering this question, Kuran consciously adopts a structuralist perspective. Private preferences can shift, he tells us, because of “economic recession, contacts with other societies, or intergenerational replacement” (p. 21). In the case of Eastern Europe, the Soviet reform movement reduced “the perceived risk of challenging the status quo.” But he maintains that no one—not even Gorbachev—“could see that a revolution was in the making.” Searching for the single factor that triggered this (or any other) revolution is “akin to trying to identify the spark that ignited a forest fire” (p. 37). Kuran’s message is clear but sobering: preference falsification renders revolutions intrinsically unpredictable.

Though both Kuran and Di Palma devote a good deal of attention to the implications of lying and falsification, their messages and methods differ in important ways. Whereas Kuran focuses on the falsities of the powerless, Di Palma labors with the lies of the powerful. Di Palma makes a convincing case for the resilience of civil society under dictatorship but insists that “the surge in mobilization was not the sufficient or main cause” (p. 75) of East European regime collapse. “Communist regimes lost their will to rule” (p. 73), he tells us, because regime elites experienced a collective “crisis of faith” (p. 50). East European dictatorships were sustained by what Di Palma (following Maria Marcus) calls “legitimation from the top” (p. 55). Rulers ruled not because civil society thought them just but because they were convinced of their own superiority. Communism gave them an “ideology that could interpret reality and . . . reinvent it, even, if facts proved stubborn” (p. 56). Though some scholars argue that the changes in the Eastern bloc are rooted in a “convergence” with the West, Di Palma locates the change in “obdurate and insulating divergence” (p. 50; emphasis added). Communism’s manifest inability to match the West in material terms or to provide anything approaching social equality strained the structure of legitimating lies for years until the “physical and ideological desertion” of the Soviet Union precipitated its final collapse (p. 49).

Di Palma’s message to social scientists is no more sanguine than Ku-
ran's. He wonders whether “we are theoretically equipped to accommodate the novelty of events in Eastern Europe” and cautions against any theories that stress “structural preconditions” and thus “underplay the role of choice” (p. 79). Nevertheless, this pessimism about existing theory is accompanied (happily) by optimism about the future of East European democracies. Di Palma concludes with the suggestion that a new zeitgeist is being born alongside a “new civic culture” that denies “the historical prophecies that stem from regional retardation and fragmentation” (p. 80).

Laitin, in his review article on national uprisings in the Soviet Union, also challenges a major historical prophecy—that empires inevitably disintegrate. Likening the Soviet Union to an “empire” is misleading, he argues, for it allows us to assume its “ultimate decomposition” (p. 143). Rather, the key to understanding the long-term implications of subnationalisms lies in a better understanding of “elite incorporation.” Those who have observed the national uprisings in the Soviet Union and “envisioned an empire rotting from within” (p. 142) have failed to appreciate how different patterns of elite incorporation affect both the nature of nationalist struggles and the ability of the central authority to cope with nationalist conflict.

Di Palma’s insistence that the “decisive operative relationship is not . . . between rulers and people” (p. 57) but between groups within the ruling elite fits well with Laitin’s theory. The latter argues that where some significant sector of a regional elite has successfully assimilated Russian culture, the Soviet center can defend itself by exploiting elite divisions within the camp of the titular nationals. In regions where little assimilation of local elites has occurred, the center will find its allies among local minorities instead. Different patterns of elite incorporation create “different sorts of political cleavages [in which] the unfolding of national dramas will have distinct plots” (p. 174).

Laitin’s study of patterns of elite incorporation in the various regions of the Soviet Union has led him to conclude that “the center will hold.” Whether this judgment is viewed as optimistic or pessimistic depends on one’s sympathies for the nationalist groups involved—but Laitin is unambiguously optimistic in his message to social scientists. “Whatever else these nationality movements have given us,” he writes, they provide “social scientists with a sufficient range of cases to enable them to do their science better” (p. 142). Whereas Kuran stresses what we cannot know and Di Palma reminds us of what we do not know, Laitin focuses on what we might still learn.

Russell Bova argues that there is much to be learned from studying
Gorbachev’s liberalization in the context of the larger literature on transitions from right-wing authoritarian rule. Where Kuran, Di Palma, and Janos draw parallels between communist rule and early absolutism, Bova strives to demonstrate the resemblance between liberalization in the Soviet Union and liberalization (and democratization) in Southern Europe and Latin America. His analysis of the conflicts between reformers and hardliners and of the many structural impediments to more rapid political change illustrates how the “dynamics of the liberalization process in the USSR adhere to a model of political change previously manifested in other parts of the world” (p. 137).

Though Bova is less concerned with the initiation of regime change than with the dynamics of a process already in motion, he nonetheless offers some insights into the question of what started the system change in the first place. He argues that in the USSR (as in Portugal, Spain, and Brazil) there were no “significant prior threats to authoritarian rule” outside the dictatorial regime. Change “had to be initiated from within the regime itself” (p. 123). For the Soviets, liberalization began, as it “invariably” does, with a split between reformers and conservatives in the dictatorial elite (p. 119). Bova explains the cause of the split with a variant of the convergence theory rejected by Di Palma. Citing Jerry Hough (who was apparently not surprised by liberalization), Bova writes that “the root of recent reform efforts” lies in the “increased education, urbanization, and stratification” produced by economic development (p. 133). He repeatedly challenges the received wisdom about Soviet exceptionalism and in so doing enlarges the set of theoretical lenses available for the study of the Soviet case.

Janos uses other theoretical lenses for the study of political change in communist regimes and thus expands our options even further. He suggests that we study contemporary Soviet and East European states not as cases of authoritarian regimes in transition but as cases of transitional military societies instead. Janos borrows the term from Herbert Spencer, who defined military societies as those in which industry is “‘essentially a permanent commissariat, existing solely to supply the needs of governmental-military structures’ ” (p. 94).

The recent changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were, according to Janos, brought on by a delayed but “genuine shift” from the principles of a military society to the principles of true and competitive industrialism. This shift, coupled with Gorbachev’s “common [European] home strategy,” forced the Soviet Union to abandon its claims on Eastern Europe and to adopt what Janos describes as a “Western democratic veneer” for its political institutions (p. 101).
Janos agrees with convergence theorists that communist regimes did industrialize and that as a result their societies became more complex and differentiated (p. 109). He goes so far as to argue that the impact of technological innovation “represents the only logical point of departure for the study of . . . political change” (p. 104). But his argument is ultimately not about convergence. Rather, it emphasizes international differences. He cautions social scientists not to expect “social processes like industrialization” to repeat themselves “from society to society” with the same effects (p. 104). In the West, with its models of true, competitive industrialism, “complexity and material abundance went hand in hand” (p. 109), whereas in Soviet-type regimes, industrialism brought “complexity cum scarcity” instead (p. 109).

In the context of a highly internationalized economic order, this combination of scarcity and complexity had powerful effects. Looking outward at what true industrialization brought to other states and looking upward at what became an increasingly affluent and corrupt communist political class, citizens of communist regimes “suffered a twofold effect of relative deprivation” (p. 108). This double deprivation led first to a legitimation crisis, then to the adoption of true industrialism, and finally to liberalization.

This brief comparative introduction outlines only the basic components of each author’s argument. All five articles deserve much more attention. Fortunately, they are likely to receive this attention, for they are both timely and bold. Most provide fresh empirical material about unfolding events that are still difficult to describe much less understand. All provide a variety of theoretical insights into how our current and future understandings might be improved.

Taken as a whole, this collection raises many intriguing questions for future research and debate. Some scholars will cite the work of Brzezinski, Hough, and others and suggest that we were neither as surprised nor as theoretically ill prepared as some of these essays contend. Scholars will also scurry to illuminate and explain the many differences between transitions within Eastern Europe. Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér have argued that the term Eastern Europe itself is “a codeword for a region homogenized by sheer violence.”1 Future research on this region will likely underscore its heterogeneity and spark a debate about whether there was a singular East European revolution at all.

Debates about the explanatory weight of mass mobilization, elite disaffection, and the effects of the Gorbachev reforms abroad will occupy

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1 Heller and Fehér, From Yalta to Glasnost: The Dismantling of Stalin’s Empire (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 281.
our time as well. The authors in this volume take different positions on each of these issues and provide a good foundation for future discussion.

They also offer us different forecasts about the fate of the changes that have already occurred. Janos is probably the most pessimistic. He writes that “the major nations of the former communist world may simply be too big to salvage” and that “in many of these countries, democracy may well remain a dream, or mere facade” (p. 111). Bova is cautious but, like Di Palma, guardedly optimistic. Writing of the long-term prospects for democracy in the Soviet Union, Bova ventures that it “is at least possible, if not probable, that a combination of skillful political leadership, external support, and good fortune may [come] to surprise the most pessimistic observers” (p. 136). This is a surprise that most of us would welcome, whether our predictive theories serve us well or not.