History is the most political of all the sciences. History is politics of the past, without which one is unable to practice politics of the present.

M.N. Pokrovskii

I am struggling in the noose of contradictions, wholly rejecting Stalin but not knowing how not to “hurt” the people and socialism.

Leon Trotsky

In 1991 the Soviet Union dissolved, ending over seven decades of existence. Although scholars have conducted numerous postmortems on the Soviet state, most have neglected the role of symbolic discourse in explaining the dramatic Soviet collapse. Under perestroika, the opening of public space permitted the emergence of heterodox reconstructions of the Soviet past that challenged the legitimacy of the Soviet regime and state. These insurgent narratives nurtured a powerful if loosely aligned opposition that undermined the Soviet Union from within and without, strongly contributing to its demise.

After the Soviet collapse, the heterodoxy of late perestroika was transformed into orthodoxy in many of the new states that emerged from under the Soviet rubble, providing the metanarratives that helped construct new national identities. But in post-Soviet Russia the insurgent discourse that had worked to delegitimate the Soviet system was itself gradually stripped of legitimacy in the first decade of the reborn Russian state. The resurrected bureaucracies that were disgraced by historical revelations during perestroika—particularly the armed forces and the security services—took revenge in post-Soviet Russia, attempting to resacralize the Soviet past to provide symbolic support for their values and interests. Paradoxically, these efforts were approved in large part by Russia society when only several years earlier it had condemned the Soviet system.
Seeking to contribute to the growing body of literature on the political role of myth and memory, I argue that the identity of a polity and its self-understandings are grounded in representations of the past, and that the prospective choices of a political community—sociopolitical, intercommunal, and interstate—are strongly influenced by these public and private narratives. The cases of the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia are intriguing examples of the importance of such discourse in a transitional setting. Although Western scholars initially assumed that Mikhail Gorbachev’s treatment of Soviet history would not stray very far from the sanitized narratives of the Brezhnev period,\(^3\) the reformers soon encouraged a debate on the tragic controversies of the Soviet past. Increasingly aware that his economic reforms were effectively opposed by elites with threatened interests, Gorbachev viewed historical *glasnost* as a means to justify his reforms and delegitimate elements of the Stalinist model of development. The expectation of the general secretary was that the regime’s controls over “history” could be loosened without endangering the core symbols and myths of the system.

In retrospect, Gorbachev’s treatment of history and myth shared important similarities with that of Nikita Khrushchev. Both leaders believed that far-reaching reform would be difficult to achieve without discussing previously taboo historical subjects or adjusting the ideology and core myths of the system.\(^4\) But there were also fundamental differences between the two periods of reform in terms of regime history and myth. Khrushchev’s exposure of Stalin’s crimes, although limited in scope, was an immense blow to the belief system of millions of Soviet citizens.\(^5\) This shock held the potential to destabilize the Soviet system, as did the elimination in the post-Stalin period of mass terror as a means of social control. Nevertheless, the political system regained its equilibrium and unorthodox discourse was marginalized. When the dissident movement eventually emerged after the fall of Khrushchev, the regime was able to insulate most of Soviet society from fundamental critiques of the system.

The Soviet system under Gorbachev failed to replicate the cycles of liberalization and retrenchment that had marked Soviet politics since the time of Lenin.\(^6\) Historical criticism in the service of reform eventually was transformed into an increasingly vituperative and one-sided debate about the legitimacy of the Soviet one-party system and its founding myths, the October Revolution of 1917 and the image of Lenin.\(^7\) By 1991, the Soviet Union’s crisis of legitimacy reached its climax. Beset by mounting challenges to its authority, including Baltic declarations of independence, the seizure of key powers of the political center by Boris Yeltsin and the rebellious Russian Republic, then a coup attempt by conservative elites followed by more declarations of independence, the Soviet state collapsed.

In order to explain why symbolic discourse escaped the control of regime reformers despite their expectations and why—in combination with