In 1989 and 1990 public attacks on the core myths of Soviet socialism grew exponentially as the costs of such behavior diminished. As fear receded, outspoken and unqualified condemnations of the Soviet past increasingly replaced the guarded and careful criticism that was common in 1988. Although many intellectuals still defended the October Revolution, they often acknowledged that Lenin had committed tragic political errors that may have led to Stalinism.

The delegitimation of Soviet mythology played an important role in destabilizing the Soviet Union. For those who supported the Soviet system or were simply acquiescent, historical glasnost rapidly undermined the perception that existing political institutions were worthy of support. The root-and-branch condemnation of the Soviet historical record also threatened entrenched strategic interests, stoking their opposition to Gorbachev’s perestroika.

Political systems, like individuals, have identities that are shaped by public memory and historical narratives. Under certain circumstances, these identities may undergo radical transformation. Insurgent discourse is cognitively subversive because it questions prevailing perceptions of the social order that incline individuals to support or at least accept the existing political system.

Despite their different theoretical orientations, both Marx and Weber agreed that the cultural stratum plays a critical role in preserving or altering the images society has of itself. If intellectuals defect from the political system in sufficient numbers, and if they voice their rejection (rather than simply “exit” or withdraw into private life), the mechanisms that maintain the identity of the system may quickly lose their integrative power. System-supportive political identities may erode, often quite suddenly, and new ones take their place.

The rejection of Soviet history by much of the Soviet media in 1989 and 1990 suggests that a significant segment of the cultural stratum judged the system illegitimate before the advent of reform and exploited the political
space created by perestroika to express their opposition. However, the evidence also suggests that despite widespread alienation and political apathy, most of the Soviet population still accepted the myths of the system. For many Soviet citizens, including those in the political elite, radical discourse undermined support for the party-state and helped to shift loyalties to liberal or ethnocentric models of political life. Political entrepreneurs mobilized many of the newly disaffected into antiregime or antistate political behavior. For those who were either unable or unwilling to embrace new political beliefs, historical glasnost often led to profound demoralization and disorientation, further weakening support for within-system reform.

The public delegitimation of Soviet mythology had an equally important influence on the behavior of believers of convenience, particularly among the diverse elites who had a strong stake in the existing system. The core myths of any political system are vital assets for strategic elites to the extent they maintain the political allegiance of the population and justify the prevailing distribution of power. But core myths also function to create and maintain intraelite cohesion. By establishing a shared political identity among elites, core myths help ensure the unity of the centers of power ultimately responsible for the survival of the regime and the state.

The task of the reformer is to reduce the power of entrenched corporate interests while still providing them a role in the reformed system to prevent their resistance or open revolt. In this context, the preservation of the core myths of the system remains vitally important because it provides symbolic assurance for these groups during a time of high political uncertainty. As glasnost escaped the control of the reformers, strategic elites felt increasingly threatened. When the delegitimation of the core myths of the Soviet system became commonplace in public discourse, these elites revolted against Gorbachev and perestroika, ensuring the regime’s internal collapse.

The chapter begins with a review of the main trends in historical discourse in 1989 and 1990, followed by an examination of the resilience of political beliefs and the conditions under which they may change rapidly. The analysis then turns to the reasons for the unwillingness of the political center to use force to defend the core myths of the system, and its inability to protect them through debate. The chapter concludes with an assessment of how the restraint of the reform leadership influenced the behavior of key institutional elites.

The Failure to Defend Core Myths

The demystification of Lenin and the October Revolution in 1989 and 1990 relied on the steady expansion of political space, which in turn depended on the refusal of the reform leadership to use force to defend the core myths of the system. The importance of these two factors was evident