

Response to Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk's review of *Der Kreml und die Wende, 1989*

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Ilko Sascha Kowalczyk has written a good deal about the history of the German Democratic Republic, but the review he published on H-Soz-u-Kult of *Der Kreml und die Wende, 1989*, which I co-edited, indicates that he knows little about the history of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev.

Kowalczyk alleges that when my co-editors and I discuss the violent crackdown by Soviet troops against unarmed demonstrators in Tbilisi in April 1989, we skew our account to defend Mikhail Gorbachev. This is absurd. What we actually do is look carefully through all the evidence about this event to determine what happened. Unfortunately, Kowalczyk himself is uninterested in doing the same because he wants to stick to his preconceived views, which are flawed. Hence, I feel the need to explain this episode in some detail, citing extensive documentation from the Russian and Georgian archives as well as other sources.

The armed crackdown in Tbilisi occurred after a surge of destabilizing unrest against the Georgian government. Mass protest rallies in the Georgian capital had begun on 4-5 April when many thousands of people gathered in the main square outside the Georgian House of Government.¹ The organizers of the demonstrations sought to foment strikes, boycotts, and other acts of defiance throughout the Georgian republic, and they also began voicing what the authorities described as “nationalistic, anti-socialist, and anti-Soviet slogans,” including calls for Georgia’s secession from the USSR. Although the demonstrations and hunger strikes remained peaceful throughout, and although the size and boisterousness of the protests gradually diminished, the leaders of the Georgian Communist Party and Georgian state apparatus were

¹ A vivid and thoughtful account of the unrest in Tbilisi and the resulting clampdown is provided in Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 182-185 and 347-354, but unfortunately Beissinger makes no use of declassified documentation and only limited use of the many memoirs now available. As a result, key parts of his discussion of the decision to use force are inaccurate. Brian Taylor does draw on some formerly secret documents and new memoirs in his brief but interesting analysis of the crackdown in “The Soviet Military and the Disintegration of the USSR,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter 2003), pp. 37-39, but recently declassified items from the Georgian and Russian archives (cited below) raise questions about his interpretations.

alarmed by the unrest and were increasingly fearful that the whole Georgian government was about to be overthrown.²

The situation took a fateful turn on 7 April when the CPSU Politburo, chaired by Egor Ligachev (standing in for Gorbachev, who at the time was in London with Shevardnadze and Yakovlev), agreed to send Soviet army troops and MVD anti-riot forces to Tbilisi to protect key buildings and roads, thus compensating for the dearth of reliable local police.³ That same day, Soviet Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov ordered one of his deputies, Army-General Konstantin Kochetov, and the commander of the Transcaucasus Military District, Colonel-General Igor Rodionov, to fly immediately to Tbilisi.⁴ After Kochetov, Rodionov, and the army and MVD units arrived in the Georgian capital on the evening of 7-8 April, the Georgian authorities desperately sought permission from Moscow to impose a state of

² Among the myriad documents attesting to the panicked reaction of the Georgian leadership, see “Postanovlenie Byuro Tsentral’nogo Komiteta Kompartii Gruzii: O vvedenii osobogo polozheniya v g. Tbilisi,” Resolution No. 121/1 (Top Secret), 7 April 1989, in Volkogonov Collection, Cold War Studies Archive, Harvard University (CWSAHU), Delo (D.) 19, List (L.) 1; “Postanovlenie Byuro Tsentral’nogo Komiteta Kompartii Gruzii: O merakh v svyazi s rezkim obostreniem politicheskoi obstanovki v respublike,” Resolution No. 122/2 (Top Secret), 8 April 1989, in Volkogonov Collection, CWSAHU, D. 21, Ll. 1-2; and “Vkhodyashchaya shifrtelgramma No.219/Sh,” ciphered telegram (Top Secret) from J. Patiashvili to the CPSU Politburo, 8 April 1989, received at 8:50 P.M., in Volkogonov Collection, CWSAHU, D. 29, Ll. 1-2. A wealth of other documentation and testimony is provided in Anatolii Sobchak, *Tbilisskii izlom, ili Krovavoe voskresen’e 1989 goda* (Moscow: Sretenie, 1993), esp. pp.82-138. Sobchak chaired a Soviet parliamentary commission that investigated the crackdown in Georgia and compiled a secret “concluding report” in December 1989, “Zaklyuchenie Komissii S’ezda narodnykh deputatov SSSR po rassledovaniyu sobytii, imevshikh mesto v g. Tbilisi 9 aprelya 1989 goda.” The commission’s report was declassified by the Russian government in 1993 and published in *Istoricheskii arkhiv* (Moscow), No. 3 (1993), pp. 102-120, along with a few related items. Sobchak’s *Tbilisskii izlom* includes some formerly secret documents and lengthy excerpts from testimony gathered by the commission, along with his own retrospective observations, which complement the excerpted materials in the chapter titled “The Tbilisi Syndrome” in his earlier memoir, *Khozhdenie vo vlast’: Rasskaz o rozhdanii parlamenta* (Moscow: Novosti, 1991), pp. 79-104. Sobchak’s commission, however, did not have access to the transcripts of two crucial meetings of the Georgian Defense Council cited below. The Defense Council transcripts help clear up key issues that the Sobchak commission was unable to resolve.

³ “Komanduyushchemu voiskami ZakVO, Komanduyushchemu VDV: S tsel’yu predotvrashcheniya vozmozhnykh besporyadkov v g. Tbilisi i drugikh raionakh Gruzinskoi SSR,” Directive No. 4/154 (Secret), 7 April 1989, issued by Defense Minister Yazov under the signature of Army-General M. Moiseev, chief of the Soviet General Staff, to the commander of the Transcaucasus Military District and the commander of Soviet Airborne Forces, in Volkogonov Collection, CWSAHU, D. 13, Ll. 1-1ob.

⁴ No doubt, one of the reasons that Yazov chose to send Kochetov as well as Rodionov to Tbilisi is that both men had served as commanders of the Transcaucasus Military District (headquartered in Tbilisi) and had long been close friends with similar career paths. Both of them had started as regiment commanders in the “Iron” Division of the Transcarpathian Military District in the early 1970s. After Kochetov was appointed commander of the “Iron” Division, he became a patron of Rodionov, who succeeded him as the division commander in 1976. Kochetov went on to become commander of the Transcaucasus Military District, and when he vacated that post in 1988 to become a deputy defense minister, Rodionov again succeeded him. Yazov therefore had ample reason to be confident that the two officers could work well together even under trying circumstances.

emergency.⁵ Although the head of the Georgian Communist Party, Jumber Patiashvili, and a few other senior Georgian officials initially were hesitant about using force and tried to delay a final decision, other members of the Georgian Defense Council were intent on violently dispersing the protesters from the very start.⁶

Those favoring repression were strongly supported by General Kochetov, who (presumably with Yazov's blessing) was eager to crush the demonstrations and was scornful of Georgian officials who "fail to recognize the direness of the situation."⁷ Kochetov demanded "urgent and decisive action" by the Georgian government to "quell the unrest provoked by extremist elements and depraved individuals." Although Patiashvili and his colleagues were still hoping to receive explicit authorization from the Soviet Politburo before they implemented a crackdown, Kochetov told them that "the magnitude of the crisis is not fully appreciated in Moscow" and that therefore "a decision [to use force] must be adopted here on the scene." He assured the Georgian leaders that he would "inform Moscow about any decisions that are adopted," but he exhorted them not to wait any longer before ordering the army and MVD units to "remove all demonstrators from the main city square and restore the normal functioning of the Georgian government."⁸ Accordingly, the Georgian Defense Council on the evening of 8 April approved "swift and resolute measures" to "restore order" and to "rectify the gravely deteriorating and increasingly catastrophic

⁵ See, for example, "Iskhodyashchaya shifrotelegramma No. 14/sh," ciphered telegram (Top Secret), sent to the CPSU Politburo by Jumber Patiashvili at 8:35 P.M., 7 April 1989 (received in Moscow at 8:40 P.M.), in Volkogonov Collection, CWSAHU, D.17, Ll. 1-2. This same document, from the receiving end in Moscow (where the heading given to it was "Vkhodyashchaya shifrotelegramma No. 217/Sh"), was reproduced in *Istoricheskii Arkhiv* (Moscow), No. 3 (1993), pp. 95-96.

⁶ Patiashvili was wavering even as late as 8 April. In the initial session of the Defense Council that day, he wanted to wait before using force, but by the time the Defense Council reconvened later in the day he strongly supported "decisive measures to restore order in the republic." See "Protokol'naya zapis' zasedaniya SO GSSR ot 8-go aprelya 1989 g.," 8 April 1989 (Top Secret), in Sak'art'velos C'entraluri Saxelmcip'o Ark'ivi (SCSA), Tbilisi, Fond (F.) I-12 (c), Dok. 2-2-53, Ll. 1-5; and "Protokol zasedaniya Soveta Oborony GSSR ot 8 aprelya 1989 g.," 8 April 1989 (Top Secret), in SCSA, F. I-12 (c), Dok. 2-2-54, Ll. 1-7.

⁷ "Protokol'naya zapis' zasedaniya SO GSSR ot 8-go aprelya 1989 g.," L. 2. See also Kochetov's comments at the subsequent Defense Council meeting, "Protokol zasedaniya Soveta Oborony GSSR ot 8 aprelya 1989 g.," Ll. 2-3.

⁸ "Protokol zasedaniya Soveta Oborony GSSR ot 8 aprelya 1989 g.," L. 3.

political situation.”⁹ This decision set in motion a large-scale crackdown in Tbilisi on 9 April under the direction of General Rodionov, an operation that killed nineteen people, including fifteen women, wounded nearly three hundred, and exposed many thousands of bystanders to tear gas and other noxious anti-riot chemicals.

In subsequent days, many commentators and parliamentarians in the Soviet Union expressed fierce criticism of the violence and denounced the army for its role. Gorbachev, who returned to Moscow from London late in the evening on 7 April, claimed that he had not known about the crackdown in advance—a claim that, in retrospect, seems plausible.¹⁰ After a brief period of hesitation, he made the momentous

⁹ Ibid., L. 5. This decision was the crucial one. It was then immediately reaffirmed by (or in the name of) the highest party and state bodies, namely, the Georgian Communist Party Bureau (Politburo) and the Georgian Council of Ministers. The formal document authorizing the crackdown, “Rasporyazhenie No. 24rs 8 aprelya 1989,” Order No. 24rs (Top Secret), was issued in the name of the Georgian Council of Ministers chaired by Zurbab Chkheidze.

¹⁰ Gorbachev’s assertion that he did not know of the crackdown in advance has been challenged by many observers, but the newly released documents that are cited above lend credence to his position and help clear up the discrepancies in memoir accounts. There is no doubt that Gorbachev was briefed on the Georgian situation as soon as he and Shevardnadze returned to Moscow at around 11:00 P.M. on 7 April. Gorbachev himself acknowledges this in his memoirs, *Zhizn’ i reform* (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), Vol. 1, p. 514. The Soviet leader received further information about the crisis in Tbilisi when the CPSU Politburo met in an emergency session on 8 April. Even so, it is doubtful that these briefings and discussions would have enabled Gorbachev to learn about the impending army-MVD operation. The transcripts of the Georgian Defense Council meetings, which were previously unavailable to scholars, make clear that the decision to use force was adopted by the Georgian leadership *without* explicit authorization from the Soviet Politburo. The transcripts also make clear that the Soviet Politburo, far from authorizing a crackdown, had in fact recommended that the Georgian authorities “wait another 2-3 days” before arresting the organizers of the demonstrations. Although two high-ranking officials in Moscow— Defense Minister Yazov (acting through Deputy Defense Minister Kochetov) and the former KGB chairman Viktor Chebrikov, who by this time was in charge of the CPSU commission that oversaw the MVD and KGB—apparently did give authorization for a crackdown on 9 April, they did so on their own without informing other members of the Politburo. The evidence for Yazov’s involvement in the matter is particularly strong. Kochetov certainly would not have urged the Georgian Defense Council to order the use of force unless he had received explicit instructions to that effect from Yazov. Although Yazov later told the Sobchak commission that he did not authorize the crackdown (see the excerpts from his testimony transcribed in *Khozhdzenie vo vlast’*, pp.88-89, 90-91), his denials are contravened by the documentary evidence, and it is not surprising that the Sobchak commission concluded that he did in fact issue an explicit order to both Kochetov and Rodionov via the telephone on 8 April. The fact that the decision to crack down was adopted in Tbilisi, not in Moscow, helps explain why the first-hand accounts by officials who were based in Moscow diverge so markedly. Aleksandr Kapto, a senior CPSU official who took part in the Soviet Politburo meeting on 8 April, writes that the Politburo members “discussed measures to restore order in Tbilisi.” He implies that Gorbachev, on this basis, must have been aware of the plans for a forceful crackdown on 9 April. See Aleksandr Kapto *Na perekrestkakh zhizni: Politicheskie memuary* (Moscow: Sotsial’no-politicheskii zhurnal, 1996), p. 311. Kapto’s version is similar to the accounts by a few others who were present during the high-level deliberations in Moscow, including Nikolai Ryzhkov (who was then Soviet prime minister) and Valerii Boldin (then head of the CPSU General Department and a senior aide to Gorbachev). Boldin in his memoirs claims that “Gorbachev knew everything” about the crackdown but “shifted all the blame to the military” because of his own “cowardice.” See V. I. Boldin, *Krushenie p’edestala: Shtrikhi k portretu M. S. Gorbacheva* (Moscow: Respublika, 1995), pp. 346-349 (quoted passage from p. 348). Ryzhkov’s version is in his *Perestroika: Istoriya predatel’stv* (Moscow: Novosti, 1992), pp. 214-217. It is worth noting, however, that Kapto, Ryzhkov, and Boldin all wrote their memoirs after leaving office, by which time they

decision to condemn the bloodshed and to disavow all responsibility for the soldiers' actions, which he described as "harmful to the interests of perestroika, democratization, and the renewal of our country."⁷⁸ Although Gorbachev tempered his criticism with stern warnings that the Soviet government would not permit "destructive forces" to "redraw borders or [to] break up the national-republic structure of the country," he emphasized that he was "deeply grieved" by the loss of life in Tbilisi. Moreover, he sent one of his closest aides, Eduard Shevardnadze, to Georgia to appeal for calm and reconciliation. Shevardnadze, who was of Georgian origin and had served as head of the Georgian internal affairs ministry and Communist Party in the 1970s and early 1980s before taking up his post in Moscow, left no doubt about where his (and, implicitly, Gorbachev's) sympathies lay. In an emotional speech to Georgian party officials on 14 April, Shevardnadze declared that "no one and nothing can justify the deaths of innocent people. We [must] ensure that this sort of tragedy never happens again either here or elsewhere in the Soviet Union."¹¹

Had Gorbachev decided instead to depict the crackdown as a necessary (if perhaps somewhat excessive) reaction to destabilizing unrest, he would have signaled that other attempts to foment instability in the USSR would likely be met with an equally vigorous response. But by essentially endorsing the harsh criticism of the repression, Gorbachev inadvertently created a "Tbilisi syndrome" that provided a rallying point for separatist groups and protest movements in the Soviet Union and gave them an incentive to step up their activities in the belief that peaceful demonstrations would no longer be forcibly subdued. This latter belief gained particular impetus from the official pledge (voiced by Shevardnadze) that the Soviet government would "never permit this sort of tragedy to happen again."

bore a deep animus toward Gorbachev. The accounts provided by some other former senior officials, such as Eduard Shevardnadze, are distinctly more favorable toward Gorbachev's claims. See, for example, Eduard Shevardnadze, *Moi vybor: V zashchitu svobody i demokratii* (Moscow: Novosti, 1991), pp. 320-326. Moreover, the comments by Ryzhkov at a CPSU Politburo meeting shortly after the violence, as recorded by Gorbachev's aide Anatolii Chernyaev, undercut Ryzhkov's memoir account and corroborate Gorbachev's denials of having known about the decision to use force. See A. S. Chernyaev, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym: Po dnevnikovym zapisyam* (Moscow: Progress, 1993), pp. 286-287. Ryzhkov's comments, as recorded by Chernyaev, are also cited in Gorbachev's own memoirs, *Zhizn' i reformy*, Vol. 1, p. 515. Thus, despite the discrepancies in memoir accounts, the documentary evidence supports Gorbachev's own version of what he knew.

¹¹ "Vystuplenie E. A. Shevardnadze na plenum TsK Kompartii Gruzii," *Zarya vostoka* (Tbilisi), 15 April 1989, p.1.

Gorbachev's denial of responsibility for the violence and Shevardnadze's reprobation of the troops' actions sparked deep antagonism with General Rodionov and other senior military officers, who felt betrayed by the political leadership and were outraged by what they perceived as the scapegoating of the army.¹² Gorbachev's demeanor also sowed hesitancy among other commanders of army units and security forces (KGB and MVD) about the possible deployment of their personnel in future crackdowns, lest they too be abandoned by Gorbachev and then subjected to relentless vilification afterward if things went awry. In all these respects, Gorbachev's response to the Tbilisi affair circumscribed his options for relying on force against opponents of the regime—a situation that proved crucial during the momentous events later that year in Eastern Europe.

Hence, the analysis we presented of the Tbilisi crackdown in *Der Kreml und die Wende 1989* is fully corroborated by declassified archival documentation, and Kowalczyk's objections are unfounded.

¹² The complaints voiced by Rodionov and other military officers about the scapegoating of the army were only partly warranted. Although Rodionov later claimed—in numerous interviews and memoirs—that he had been opposed to the crackdown and had tried until the last minute to forestall it, the bulk of the evidence (including his own testimony to the Sobchak commission, as transcribed in Sobchak, *Tbilisskii izlom*, pp.110-111, 129-130) does not corroborate his assertions. When Rodionov arrived in Tbilisi on the evening of 7-8 April, he did not yet have authorization for a crackdown and was therefore not urging that the army be used for that purpose, but by the following day, after he spoke with Yazov on the phone, he seemed fully ready to oversee the operation. The newly available transcripts of the Georgian Defense Council meetings on 8 April leave no doubt that, by that point, Rodionov did not object to the crackdown in principle and was worried only that the Georgian leaders were hesitant about granting their explicit consent. The transcripts belie Rodionov's subsequent assertions that on 8 April he urged the Georgians not to embroil the army in internal political disputes and warned them he did not have enough troops to enforce martial law. See, for example, the misleading post-facto accounts in Kapto, *Na perekrestkakh zhizni*, p. 321; Aleksandr Zhilin, "General Igor' Rodionov: Vozvrashchenie iz ssylki," *Moskovskie novosti* (Moscow), No. 29 (21-28 July 1996), p. 7; Nataliya Gevorkyan, "General Rodionov: Prikazy ne obsuzhdayutsya," *Kommersant* (Moscow), No. 27 (23 July 1996), pp. 6-7; and the interview with Shevardnadze in Leonid Pleshakov, "Ubezhdat' pravdoi," *Ogonek* (Moscow), No. 11 (March 1990), pp. 2-6.