

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OF 1991 AND THE DISSOLUTION OF THE USSR¹

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INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was one of the defining events of the 20th Century. It signaled the end of the Cold War, a half-century long conflict which threatened the world with nuclear destruction, and which caused a number of “hot” wars from Angola to Vietnam. It also signaled the end of communism as an alternative to capitalism and democracy.

Fifteen years after the Soviet collapse, we can only guess what will be history’s final verdict when it comes to explaining why the second-most powerful country in the world disintegrated in the space of a few years. Which leader will historians credit for bringing about such a momentous change? Mikhail Gorbachev, or Boris Yeltsin – or Ronald Reagan? Will we remember, or will we forget, the role of dissident intellectuals like Andrei Sakharov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn? And what about the leaders of East European protest movements, such as Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel?

If the jury is still out on the causes of the Soviet collapse, it is equally premature to try to evaluate the lasting consequences. Reportedly, when Chinese leader Zhou En Lai was asked by Henry Kissinger in 1972 what he thought was the legacy of the 1789 French revolution, he replied that “it is too soon to tell.”

Historians and political scientists have not yet forged a consensus on why and how the Soviet Union collapsed. Many argue that the collapse was inevitable, that it was bound to happen sooner or later. But this does not explain why it happened precisely *when* it did, *how* it did.

Most observers agree that the Soviet Union was a failed experiment, which had long ago lost its viability as an alternative model to Western capitalism. The Soviet economy was highly inefficient and unresponsive to consumer demand. The political system was based on coercion rather than consent. The state devoted massive resources to controlling information flows and eliminating dissent.

What is puzzling is that this system collapsed so quickly, within a few years. Was the system doomed to fail in 1991, or could it have staggered on for a few more years, or decades? If the system was fatally flawed, why didn’t it expire in 1933, during the great famine; or in 1941, when Nazi armies reached the gates of Moscow; or in 1953, after the death of the all-powerful Joseph Stalin?

¹ From: James deFronzo (ed.), *Revolutionary Movements in World History* (ABC-Clio, 2006).

The Soviet system did have certain strengths. It survived for 75 years, emerged victorious from World War Two, and managed to challenge the United States for global leadership during the Cold War. The regime created by Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin produced a modern, educated, urban society, with a standard of living that that was impressive to Third World countries even as it lagged well behind that of the developed West. Although the political system denied basic freedoms to the population, it did ensure the country's independence from foreign domination – an important consideration that made the Soviet model attractive to many leaders of newly-decolonized states in the Third World in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Soviet Union was the first self-styled “workers’ state” dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism. It claimed a global revolutionary role: its purpose was to replace the entire international system. Unique among states, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics did not include any geographic or ethnic marker in its title. (“Soviet” is Russian for “council.”) This means that the “revolution” that ended Soviet power was not just a product of domestic developments within that country. It must also be seen in an international context. Once Moscow lost faith in its ability to defeat the West, the state also lost its very reason for existence.

BACKGROUND: CULTURE AND HISTORY

What, then, were the deep structural flaws in the Soviet political model, which laid the foundations for the Soviet collapse? They can be grouped into five categories – nationalism, military competition, political succession, economic stress and social change

1) Nationalism

Nationalism was the key single variable that brought about the Soviet collapse. It was both a deep structural flaw, and a proximate cause.

At the beginning of the 20th century, most of the peoples of the world were living under empires. They did not enjoy self-rule, but were controlled by distant rulers who belonged to a different nationality. By the century's end, *all* of these empires had collapsed: Ottoman, Hapsburg, English, French, Dutch, Belgian, and Portugese.

The Soviet Union was a multi-national state – although its rulers denied that it was an empire, and tried to promote a new concept of citizenship, “the Soviet people” that transcended ethnic identity. But the Soviet Union disintegrated, like the other multi-national empires. One cannot help concluding that if the Soviet Union had been as ethnically homogeneous as China, it would probably still be in business.

Ethnic Russians made up just 52 percent of the 290 million Soviet population. (In contrast 85% of China's population are Han Chinese.) The remaining 140 million included representatives of 160 distinct ethnic groups. There were 50 million Slavs such as Ukrainians and Belarusians; 40 million Moslems, mainly in Central Asia; and the numerically small but proud and ancient nations of the Caucasus. Fearful of Russian nationalism, Lenin created the Soviet Union as an ethnic federation, with 15 major nations each given their own Soviet republic. The Russian Republic itself was a federation, with autonomous republics for 21 indigenous groups living on its territory (including the Moslem Tatars and Chechens). The Russian Republic was something of an anomaly because it had less autonomy from the Soviet federal government than the other republics. This was because ethnic Russians dominated the central apparatus of the Soviet state, but it still left some Russians, paradoxically, feeling that their national interests were less well represented than other nations.

During the Soviet era, the Communist Party, aided by the KGB, kept a tight grip on political expression. Especially under Stalin any signs of nationalist sympathies were vigorously repressed. But the federal structure did ensure that minority languages and cultures were fairly well preserved, at least for the 36 groups that had their own republic. Political and intellectual elites in each republic developed a strong sense of national identity, and they tried to defend the interests of their region, within the limits imposed by the central controls of the Communist Party and planning ministries.

When Gorbachev opened the door to free speech after 1985, with his policy of glasnost or openness, the first people to respond were nationalist activists in the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania); the Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan); and western Ukraine. The Baltic republics and Western Ukraine had only been incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940, and most of their inhabitants never accepted the Soviet occupation. The Caucasus republics and Central Asia were occupied by the Tsars in the 19th century. There were some strong ethnic

rivalries among the peoples of those regions. For example, Georgians wanted full control over ethnic minorities in Abkhazia and Ossetia, while ethnic Armenians living in Karabakh resented the fact that their province was included in Azerbaijan. These disputes, which had simmered for decades, triggered violent conflict between rival groups in 1988-89.

These ethnic disputes were troublesome, but they were confined to about 10 percent of the Soviet population. There was little unrest in Central Asia, in part because the communist leaders of the region kept a tight grip. Such conflicts could in principle have been managed – just as Communist China successfully represses secessionist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang. Apart from the Baltic states, Mark Beissinger (2002) has shown that most of the violent ethnic conflicts were “horizontal” (against local rival groups) rather than “vertical” (against Moscow).

Nationalism played a decisive role not so much in mobilizing the masses, but in providing an exit strategy for disaffected regional communist elites. The decisive nationalist movement was that of Russia itself. Unable to remove Gorbachev from power as president of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin instead removed the Russian Federation from the USSR, leaving Gorbachev a president without a country. We do not usually think of Yeltsin as a nationalist, since he came to power through democratic elections, and stood up in defense of human rights. But it was Yeltsin’s drive for Russian sovereignty that brought an end to the Soviet Union 1991.

2) Military defeat

Historically, most empires have collapsed following a defeat in war, or inability to win a war at a cost acceptable to the people back home. The Soviet Union was no exception. In the 1980s it lost two wars – the Afghan war and the Cold War.

In 1979 Leonid Brezhnev sent 120,000 troops into Afghanistan, on the southern border of the Soviet Union, to prop up a Marxist, pro-Soviet regime. Despite ruthless force, driving millions of Afghans into exile, Moscow was unable to crush the resistance. The United States helped the Afghan fighters based in Pakistan with money and weapons – including shoulder-fired Stinger missiles that could take down Soviet helicopters. Although at least 15,000 Soviet soldiers died in Afghanistan (according to official figures (Borovik, 281)), the main cost was political – it blackened Moscow in the eyes of the international community. Gorbachev tried to persuade the U.S. to stop supporting the resistance in order to get peace with honor in Afghanistan. Soviet troops withdraw in 1989, but fighting continued and the pro-Moscow government was finally overthrown in 1992.

In response to the invasion of Afghanistan, the U.S boosted its defense spending. In 1983 President Ronald Reagan announced a space-based defense system to protect America from nuclear attack. The “Star Wars” program deeply alarmed the Soviet military. They did not believe the system would work, but were afraid that taking counter-measures would over-burden the Soviet military budget. Also they feared that the research program could produce a new generation of conventional weapons (such as precision-guided munitions) that would give the U.S. the edge in future wars.

Mikhail Gorbachev entered arms control talks with the U.S. in the hope that he could persuade Reagan to halt the Star Wars program. Gorbachev did not imagine that by negotiating an end to the Cold War he would trigger a chain of events that led to the collapse of the USSR.

The end of the Cold War meant that the Soviet military did not actively resist Gorbachev's moves to withdraw from East Europe. The latter no longer had any strategic value, if the Soviet state was no longer preparing itself for all-out war with the U.S.

3) Political succession

A key factor in the Soviet breakdown was the problem of political succession and the passage of generations. A fundamental weakness of the Soviet system was the lack of a succession mechanism. General Secretaries could not be criticized, and they could not be removed. They stayed in office until they died. The sole exception was the removal of Nikita Khrushchev in 1964: his flaws included disastrous farm reforms, defeat in the Cuban missile crisis, and an administrative shake-up that threatened the unity of the Communist Party.

The inability to remove leaders applied not just at the top, but at every level in the party hierarchy. Incompetent leaders stayed in office for decades. New ideas, and new leaders, were not tolerated. Stalin had not faced this problem because he systematically purged the ranks of party leaders. After Stalin's death, party leaders agreed not to conduct mass purges. For twenty years, from 1965 to 1985, as the party leadership aged, urgently needed reforms were postponed.

The Brezhnev generation had been born around 1910, and their formative experience was World War Two. In the 1980s, these 70-somethings still dominated the Politburo and Communist Party bureaucracy. Only in 1985, with the appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev, did the Politburo open the door to a new generation of political leaders – who had started their careers after the death of Stalin

4) Economic stress

The Soviet Union was the world's first Marxist state, in which private ownership of the means of production was outlawed and all the nation's farms, stores and factories were taken into state ownership. Many Western economists believed that such a system could not function, but the Soviet Union survived for 75 years.

The inefficiencies of central planning are well known – the long lines for goods, the poor quality of consumer products, the black market for blue jeans. Many people conclude that economic inefficiency was responsible for the collapse of the Soviet system.

But that is only partly true. The official Soviet Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew at impressive rates in the 1950s and 1960s, and did produce a steady improvement in living standard for ordinary citizens. However, this economic growth was extensive rather than intensive, based on natural resources (land, minerals, manpower) and high rates of forced saving and investment. By the 1960s, the easily obtained resources were running out. The inefficiencies of the overly-centralized economy meant that many resources were wasted. Soviet farms in particular were extremely inefficient. After 1962 the Soviet Union often had to import food to meet consumer needs. While the Soviet system was pretty good at generating scientific innovations, such as the launch of Sputnik in 1957, it was hopeless at introducing them into mass production.

Soviet economists recognized the need for change. But Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1964 to 1982, feared that economic reform would lead to political

liberalization. It was fear of such a development that led to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. In the 1960s the Western economies were forging ahead, while the Soviet economy was falling behind. But the Soviet Union was the second largest oil exporter in the world, and benefited from the surge in oil prices after the Mid-East crises of 1973 and 1979. That helped it import food, new technology and scarce consumer goods.

Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich (1998) have shown that the Soviet GDP was not *decreasing* in the early 1980s (the slump only began in 1990), and the economy could have stumbled on for many more years. Tighter discipline could have squeezed out more growth, while crushing dissent. This was the approach favored by former KGB chief Yuri Andropov, who took power in 1982, but he was struck down by kidney disease just 13 months later. Had he lived, the Soviet Union could still be around today.

Above all, it was the half-hearted economic reforms launched by Gorbachev after 1985 that disrupted the functioning of the planned economy. That together with the dislocations caused by political liberalization produced goods shortages and rampant inflation by 1989, leading to more popular protests and systemic collapse.

The revolution of 1989-91 also exemplifies the role of rising expectations. Since the death of Stalin, Soviet power had rested less on fear and more on the promise of material improvements. For decades official propaganda told the Soviet people that their lives were getting better, but actual living standards fell short of their expectations.

5) Social movements and social values

Social mobilization was not a decisive factor in the Soviet collapse – outside the nationalist movements. There was no social revolution in Russia in 1991, on a par with the revolutions of 1789 and 1917, or Iran in 1979. Mass mobilization was largely limited to Moscow and other major cities and was of short duration. The "democratic movement" did not produce a lasting political organization (such as Poland's Solidarity trade union).

Despite much talk of a resurgent civil society, there was little evidence that grass-roots organizations played a pivotal role in the events of 1985-91. The strongest social movement was that of the environmentalists, which had spread rapidly in response to the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. They had some success in publicizing ecological problems, even closing down some polluting plants. But their leaders went on to win election to regional and national office in 1989-90, and the Greens dissolved into the broader democratic movement.

The erosion of ideology played an important part in the Soviet collapse. Most ordinary people had little if any faith in the official Marxist-Leninist ideology. A gradual disillusion with stagnant living standards and bureaucratic red-tape contrasted with glimpses of a freer world: from smuggled news magazines, vacations in Bulgaria, or just listening to rock songs over the radio. The hollowing out of the official ideology during the political stagnation of the Brezhnev era meant that party conservatives were not able to mobilize supporters in opposition to Gorbachev's reforms – and they were outnumbered by followers of Boris Yeltsin, who was calling for even more radical change

Even most of the ruling elite no longer believed in the ideology: their sons and daughters certainly did not. Gorbachev's decision to allow free speech in the media (glasnost) exposed the

gap between official propaganda and people's real opinions. Nevertheless, voting patterns in free elections since 1991 suggest that about one-third of the Russian population were true believers, still committed to Soviet values.

The main impact of ideological decay was at elite rather than mass level. The lack of confidence in their own system fatally eroded the resolution of the Soviet elite. Even the hardliners who tried to seize power in August 1991 were not confident in their own legitimacy, and lacked the will to use force in defense of values they now saw as outdated.

In the past few years it has become quite common to argue that "globalization" doomed the Soviet state. The argument is that new information technologies made it impossible for the Soviet leadership to seal off the country from a true understanding of how far their country was falling behind the developed West.

This argument is only partly valid. The big breakthroughs in global communications technology – satellite TV and the Internet – only spread to Russia *after* 1991. Before that, the only means of communication into the Soviet Union were smuggling printed matter across the border and international radio broadcasting. Up to the bitter end the Soviet state was pretty effective at blocking these information sources – jamming international radio news, for example. Most East Europeans were freer to travel to the West and had a better idea than Soviet citizens about what life there was like. Even the East Germans, who could not travel, were often able to pick up West German TV. But the international information revolution was not a decisive factor in the fall of communism.

CONTEXT AND PROCESSES

The dissolution of the Soviet state played out very quickly, in a flurry of accelerating change that stood in stark contrast to the decades of stagnation that preceded it. It was a revolution where the key players were elites, and not the mobilized masses. It was a top-down rather than bottom-up process, although at several stages mass reactions were critical in enabling one elite faction to defeat another. It is impossible to explain the demise of the USSR without granting decisive roles to Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, two individuals whose caustic rivalry brought down the mighty structures of Soviet state power.

The end-game consisted, essentially, of seven steps:

- 1) Mikhail Gorbachev is appointed as General Secretary. (1985)
- 2) Gorbachev decided to launch reform in domestic and foreign policy.
- 3) An explosion of nationalist discontent in the Soviet periphery threw Gorbachev on the defensive. (1988)
- 4) Gorbachev's half-hearted economic reforms caused a breakdown of the central planning system.
- 5) Gorbachev introduced limited free elections, when he found that bureaucrats were blocking his reforms. Boris Yeltsin used these elections to build a power base for himself in the Russian Republic.
- 6) Popular protests in East Europe caused the regimes there to tumble, one after the other.
- 7) Soviet hardliners staged an abortive coup in August 1991, which exposed the lack of support for Gorbachev, and enables Yeltsin to dissolve the Soviet Union.

The rise of Gorbachev

In April 1985 the Soviet Politburo decided to elect Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary. His three predecessors had died one after the other over the preceding three years: each of them had been too sick to govern effectively. Gorbachev was healthy, and at 54 he was 21 years younger than the average Politburo member. Although the conservatives feared that he would stir things up, the moderates concluded that a new, more decisive leader was precisely what their country needed to meet the challenge posed by U.S. President Ronald Reagan, who had launched a political offensive against what he called the "evil empire." Other challenges included a stagnant economy, the unwinnable war in Afghanistan, and continuing unrest in Poland. The Solidarity trade union movement there had nearly toppled the communist government in 1980, and only the imposition of martial law in December 1981 had saved the regime.

The second critical factor was the character of Mikhail Gorbachev. He was intelligent, decisive and self-willed. Gorbachev's goal in reforming the Soviet state was to make it more competitive with the U.S. The irony is that in trying to save the Soviet Union he unwittingly brought about its destruction. He was then, a reluctant or accidental revolutionary.

The main power base for Gorbachev was the Communist Party – the very institution that he was trying to reform. During his time in office Gorbachev tried to develop other sources of power. He drummed up political and financial support from Western leaders. He enlisted the Russian intelligentsia to promote his reforms. And he tried to mobilize public opinion behind his agenda. But Gorbachev was not popular among ordinary Russians. His speaking style was rather stiff,

they resented his elegant wife, and they blamed him for the growing economic problems and ethnic conflict.

As General Secretary, Gorbachev had to work with a state and party that was deeply hostile to change. The officials who ran the party and state apparatus were known as the *nomenklatura*, so called because their jobs were on lists (“nomenklatura”) that had to be filled with candidates approved by the relevant Communist Party committee. The nomenklatura were rewarded with privileges such as better apartments, limousines, access to special shops, limited foreign travel, and assured entry for their children to elite educational institutions. Gorbachev’s great disappointment was that few party officials responded positively to his call for change or *perestroika* (literally, “reconstruction”). Most of the nomenklatura resisted change until the bitter end, and in doing so they doomed the Soviet Union. Gorbachev was fully aware of the contradictions in being a reformist General Secretary. He later described himself as “a product of that very nomenklatura and at the same time its anti-product, its ‘gravedigger,’ so to speak (Brown, 1996, 316).” By stripping the Communist Party of its supervisory powers, he was undermining the key bureaucratic structure that held together the Soviet Union.

Perestroika

Gorbachev started out with moderate domestic initiatives: an anti-alcohol campaign (that was deeply unpopular), and a policy of openness, or *glasnost*, to promote more free discussion in the media. But he had achieved little in his first year in office. Things changed with the explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in April 1986: a disaster that nearly caused millions of casualties. The accident was caused by sloppy safety procedures and an unauthorized experiment by the plant director. It showed that Soviet bureaucracy was not only annoying, but positively dangerous. Across the country there were demonstrations outside dozens of nuclear facilities, demanding information about their operations. This upsurge of public activism was unprecedented in Soviet history. Popular fear of eco-catastrophe replaced fear of KGB persecution.

After Chernobyl, *glasnost* began to spread: at first in the theater, then in limited-run magazines, then in national newspapers, and finally on the television. With Gorbachev’s encouragement, intellectuals, editors and journalists steadily and cautiously pushed back the limits on press freedom. For a public starved of free speech for decades, it was exhilarating, but also a little frightening. Suddenly, all the problems that the inflexible Soviet bureaucracy had ignored for decades suddenly burst onto the nation’s TV screens: the housing shortage; the health crisis; Stalin’s repressions.

Nationalist unrest

Among the first to respond to the new freedom were nations who had nurtured their grievances for years – the Armenians in the province of Karabakh that was awarded to Azerbaijan in 1923, and the Balts who were forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940. Gorbachev sent troops to quell demonstrations in the Caucasus, and arrested the nationalist leaders in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Gorbachev had not foreseen the nationalist unrest, and he had no strategy for dealing with it. Because he wanted to preserve the Soviet Union, he was unwilling to grant the Balts independence. In Estonia and Latvia Russian migrants made up 40 percent of the

population, so Moscow used their presence as an excuse to deny independence. Lithuania was more assertive, because there Russians only made up 15 percent of the population.

Gorbachev's crackdown on nationalism caused many Russian democrats to switch their support to a new rising star in the Communist Party, Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin was the party boss in Sverdlovsk, an industrial city in the Ural mountains. Gorbachev appointed him in to head the Moscow City Party and launch perestroika in the nation's capital. However, the personalities of these two strong-willed men clashed, and Gorbachev fired Yeltsin in 1987.

Economic failure

Gorbachev tried to reform the central planning system by "democratizing" it. The idea was to use popular pressure from below to encourage officials to be less corrupt and more efficient. In 1987 managers were given more freedom to run their factories, but in return they had to put themselves up for election by the workers. The reform was a disaster. Managers used their new freedom to ignore plan targets, while placating their workers with wage increases, triggering an inflationary spiral. Gorbachev resisted the introduction of private property and real market reform. Despite a surge in the money supply, the government postponed raising official prices, meaning that store shelves emptied even faster. Limits on small-scale entrepreneurial activity were lifted, leading to a boom in street-corner trading and individual services. But the main state-owned farms and factories were left untouched. The longer reform was delayed, the worse was the economic situation, and the more radical the corrective measures needed. It was left up to Gorbachev's successor, Boris Yeltsin, to bite the bullet of price liberalization and privatization in 1992.

Democratization

In the face of mounting pressure, Gorbachev's decided to introduce semi-free elections. His goal was to outflank the party conservatives, who he blamed for blocking the reforms. In the elections for a new USSR Congress of People's Deputies in March 1989, the Communist Party was the only party allowed to compete, but across the country there were humiliating defeats for Party candidates at the hands of independent candidates nominated by local trade unions and social organizations.

Yeltsin returned from political oblivion, winning election from the Moscow district. In the Baltic and Caucasus republics the elections were won by nationalists. The 1989 election was for the federal, USSR parliament. In March 1990 there were elections to parliaments in the 15 national republics and in regional councils. Pro-democracy deputies formed a majority in some key Russian cities, including Moscow. These elections undermined the legitimacy of the Communist Party and provided a platform for a new generation of political leaders. Gorbachev did not put himself up for election: he was appointed president by the unelected Supreme Soviet in 1988. Having freed the democracy "genie", Gorbachev would not be able to stuff it back into its bottle.

Revolution in East Europe

Meanwhile, dramatic developments were taking place in the outer ring of the Soviet empire. People in East Europe seized the opening provided by Gorbachev to push for an end to communist rule. The Communist leaders in Hungary and Poland chose to lead the dismantling of communism in order to get on the right side of history – and maybe save their own careers. The

leaders in East Germany and Czechoslovakia resisted reform – and appealed to Gorbachev for permission to crack down. Then in June 1989 Chinese leaders authorized the shooting of hundreds of protestors on Tiananmen Square. (The demonstrations actually coincided with a state visit to Beijing by Gorbachev.)

Gorbachev did not want to go down in history as a butcher, so he vetoed the use of force to stop the protests in East Germany. The 500,000 Soviet troops based in East Germany stayed in their barracks. Gorbachev's principled stance sealed the fate of the East German regime: by November, the Berlin wall was opened. One after another, all the communist governments of East Europe abandoned their monopoly on power.

The collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe emboldened the Baltic nationalists and Russian democrats, and demoralized Soviet conservatives. If Gorbachev was unwilling to use force in East Germany, it was going to be very difficult for him to use force in Lithuania – or Moscow.

In 1990-91, as political legitimacy shifted from the Soviet president to the elected Russian parliament, many provincial industrialists switched their tax payments from the Soviet (federal) budget to that of the Russian Republic, controlled by Yeltsin. By mid-1991, the Soviet government was bankrupt.

Gorbachev drew admiring crowds during his visits to Western capitals, his international prestige did not help him at home. The arms control agreements he did not provide any improvements visible at home. At least he was able to negotiate a withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, bringing an end to that unpopular war.

The most concrete assistance from the West was financial. Between 1985 and 1991 Gorbachev received about \$50 billion in low-interest loans, including a \$10 billion grant from Germany in return for Gorbachev's approval of German unification in 1990. These funds covered the importation of scarce food and consumer goods, and kept the battered economy running for a couple more years.

Countdown to the August 1991 coup

In 1990-91 these diverse pressures mounted into a “perfect storm” for Gorbachev. Inflation and goods shortages triggered a wave of strikes by miners and steelworkers. The newly elected parliaments provided a public platform for Gorbachev's nationalist and democratic critics. The nation's media brushed aside the censors and embraced full-scale press freedom.

Gorbachev began making contingency plans for a state of emergency, at the same time he was trying to broker a deal that would preserve the Soviet Union as a looser confederation of states – although only 8 of 15 republics were willing to sign the treaty. These two trends came together in August 1991, when Gorbachev's own cabinet launched a coup d'état, just days before the new union treaty was due to be signed. Gorbachev and his wife were detained in their holiday villa, while his vice-president, Gennady Yanaev, went on TV to announce that power was in the hands of the State Committee for the State of Emergency.

The coup failed. The soldiers and KGB special forces sent to storm the Russian parliament and arrest Yeltsin refused to act when they saw that the building was ringed by unarmed demonstrators. The coup leaders themselves were hesitant: it was later learned that several of

them were drunk. After a tense 48 hours, the coup collapsed, and its leaders were arrested. Gorbachev was freed, but when he returned to Moscow he found he no longer had a country to govern. Yeltsin signed decrees banning the Communist Party and taking control over the Soviet armed forces on the territory of the Russian Republic. In December Yeltsin met with the presidents of Ukraine and Belarus in Minsk and agreed to create a new Commonwealth of Independent States, that was later joined by nine other Soviet republics. The Soviet Union was officially dissolved and replaced by 15 new independent states.

Evaluation

Scholars differ over whether Gorbachev or Yeltsin deserves more credit for the break-up of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev initiated the reforms, and made the crucial decision not to use force to try to hold the country together. But his *intention* was to save the USSR. Yeltsin was more consistent: he embraced democracy, and was willing to give up the Soviet Union if that was the only way to preserve democracy. Soviet communists blame both men for destroying the Soviet Union in their selfish struggle for power. They also accuse the West of manipulating the two men to bring about the destruction of the USSR. Given the costs of post-Soviet transition, neither man is very popular among ordinary Russians today.

Other observers are reluctant to grant such a pivotal role to individual leaders. David Kotz and Fred Weir (1997) argue that the Soviet Union fell because the elites who ran it decided that they could have a better life if they ditched the Soviet system. As the economy disintegrated in the wake of Gorbachev's bungled reforms, many members of the party elite abandoned the sinking ship of state socialism and launched the lifeboats for market capitalism. Indeed, most of the leaders of post-1991 Russia came out of the ranks of the old party-state elite, or at least they were the sons and daughters of the old elite. And they benefited handsomely from the transition to capitalism. (By 2005 Russia had 37 dollar billionaires, the second highest number in the world after the U.S.) However, just because individuals from the old elite benefited from the transition by seizing opportunities to make money does not mean that they caused those events to occur. The introduction of capitalism in Russia was essentially spontaneous and unexpected. It was the result of human action but not of human design.

IMPACTS

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is one of the turning points in world history, on a par with 1789 or 1914. Whether or not the events of 1989-91 were a revolution in the traditional sense of the word, or merely a system collapse, they changed the structure of the international system that had been in place since 1945, and caused a shift in domestic politics in states all around the world.

A new world order?

In the spring of 1989 U.S. scholar Francis Fukuyama (1989) wrote an influential essay in which he argued that the breakdown of communist regimes in East Europe signaled “The end of history.” By this he meant the end of an alternative model of social development to what U.S. President Bill Clinton called “market democracy.” After the Soviet collapse the Chinese communists still clung to one-party rule, but even they had embraced capitalist methods for running their economy since 1978. Fukuyama predicted that with the fall of communism, the world would no longer be divided into two rival ideological camps.

The end of the Cold War left the United States as the undisputed world leader. It was now the dominant military power, and no longer had to fear imminent destruction in a Soviet surprise attack. This allowed the United States to cut military spending by one third (the “peace dividend”). The U.S. reduced its forces in Europe but did not dismantle the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (The Soviet led military alliance, the Warsaw Pact, dissolved in 1991.)

George W. Bush, U.S. President 1988-92, talked about the need for a “new world order” to replace the Cold War. But that vision presupposed a partnership with Gorbachev’s Soviet Union, which no longer existed. The first – and last – sign of that partnership was Gorbachev’s acquiescence in the U.S. led invasion of Iraq in 1991, to reverse its occupation of Kuwait. U.S. President Bill Clinton, who took office in 1993, focused on domestic issues and the promotion of international free trade. Clinton continued to pursue good relations with Russia, though corruption, authoritarianism and the war in Chechnya made Boris Yeltsin a less attractive partner as the decade wore on.

Several times in the 1990s the U.S. and her allies launched “humanitarian interventions” to try to prevent gross abuses of human rights. The new threats to U.S. security came from “non-traditional sources” – the proliferation of nuclear materials from Soviet arsenals; the instability caused by “failed states”; and the spread of organized crime and international drug trafficking. However, Russia was a reluctant partner in these efforts, and the U.S. failed to articulate a clear vision for international cooperation to deal with these issues. U.S. policy drifted towards isolationism, until the September 11th attacks gave it a new mission – the global war on terror

Nationalist conflicts

The end of “History” did not mean an end to conflict around the world. New motives for fighting surfaced to replace the ideological rivalry of the Cold War – nationalism and religious fervor. Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington argued that a “clash of civilizations” would replace the clash of ideologies of the post-1945 era. (Huntington, 1993)

Three of the communist states were ethnic federations: the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. All three broke up after 1989: powerful evidence for the idea that nationalism filled the political vacuum created by the crumbling of ideology. The break-up was violent in Yugoslavia, but peaceful in the case of Czechoslovakia, which split amicably into the Czech and Slovak Republics in 1992.

Nationalism triggered open warfare within the former Soviet Union: in Moldova, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The fighting ended in cease-fires in 1992, but there has been no progress towards a lasting peace. The secessionist regions (TransDniester, Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia) prevented the sovereign state from establishing control over their territory, thanks to military assistance from Russia. But they were unable to win international recognition, their economies have collapsed, and they are pockets of anarchy that serve as a base for organized crime groups. Meanwhile 800,000 refugees in Azerbaijan and 300,000 in Georgia are still unable to return to their homes.

A wave of democratization

The end of the Soviet empire ignited what Michael McFaul (2002) has called the “fourth wave” of global democratization. The East European states enthusiastically embraced free elections and most embraced economic “shock therapy” to make the transition from state planning to capitalism as rapidly as possible. Remarkably few of the countries tried to look for social democratic, welfare state solutions that might avoid the extremes of central planning and liberal market capitalism. All of them suffered from a “transition recession” that saw living standards plummet by one third, but most started growing strongly after 3-5 years of adjustment. By 2004, eight of the former socialist countries became full members of the European Union: an event that would have been inconceivable back in 1985.

Within the former Soviet Union itself, the record of post-communist transition has been mixed, at best. Although the countries all pay lip-service to democracy, fair elections are rare. There are more personal freedoms than in Soviet times – but there is also more crime and corruption. In most places, the communist elite stayed on in power after the Soviet collapse, while rejecting communist ideology in favor of the rhetoric of markets, democracy and national independence. Only in the Baltic countries, Armenia and Georgia did new rulers emerge from the ranks of the nationalist movement. In all other places, the person who headed the republic when the USSR collapsed in 1991 calmly took over as president of the new country. In Central Asia, leaders fixed elections and used police-state tactics to stay in power. In Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko won election on a populist platform in 1994, then went on to establish a personal dictatorship. In Ukraine, the first post-independence president lost an election in 1994 and stepped down. His successor, Leonid Kuchma, tried to hand-pick his successor, but popular protests (the “Orange revolution”) in December 2004 thwarted his efforts to rig the election.

In Russia, Boris Yeltsin stayed on as president, calling out the army in 1993 to disband the Congress, which objected to his radical economic reforms. Yeltsin oversaw the privatization of most of the Russian economy, with choice oil fields and metals plants sold for a pittance to favored insiders. Russian politics came to be dominated by a small, incredibly wealthy group of billionaires, the “oligarchs.” Yeltsin won a second term in 1996, in an election widely regarded as unfair because the television stations rallied behind the president against his communist challenger. In December 1999 Yeltsin passed on the presidency to his chosen successor, the former KGB veteran Vladimir Putin. Putin re-centralized power by establishing control over the

oligarchs, the television stations, and regional leaders. Putin's state bears some of the features of the old Soviet Union, including patriotic nostalgia and a strong police presence. But Putin has sought cooperation with the West, and has not tried to reverse Yeltsin's market reforms.

The Soviet collapse meant an abrupt end to diplomatic and financial support for Soviet allies around the world. From Albania to Benin, dictators who used Marxist rhetoric to justify authoritarian rule changed course after 1989, and started holding free or semi-free elections. Communist regimes in Cuba, Laos, North Korea and Vietnam clung to power, though even they launched economic reform in varying degrees.

Likewise, right-wing authoritarian leaders around the world also sensed that the U.S. would no longer be so tolerant of repressive methods in the name of battling communism. The most striking example of this dynamic was the dissolution of apartheid in South Africa. Prime Minister Frederik De Klerk realized that with the Soviet Union gone, the U.S. would no longer support South Africa as a bulwark against Marxist regimes in Angola and Mozambique. So in February 1990, just three months after the fall of the Berlin wall, de Klerk released Nelson Mandela from prison and went on to allow free elections, on the understanding that the civil and property rights of the White elite would be preserved. In 1994 a black majority government was elected. It is hard to imagine such a rapid and relatively peaceful end to apartheid if the Berlin Wall had not fallen.

PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS

Andropov, Yuri (1914-1984): Head of Committee on State Security (KGB) 1967-82, General Secretary of the Communist Party, 1982-84. Andropov brought Gorbachev to Moscow and chose him as his number two.

Brezhnev, Leonid (1906-1982): General Secretary of the Communist Party, 1964-1982. His leadership saw steadily improving living standards, but no political or economic reform.

Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The loose confederation that is formed in December 1991 to replace the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Eleven former Soviet republics join the CIS, later joined by Georgia. The Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania refuse to take part.

Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Formed by Vladimir Lenin, the CPSU is the only party allowed to operate between 1918 and 1990. It tightly controlled all political and economic activities in Soviet society, but was fatally weakened by the reforms launched by Gorbachev in 1985.

Gorbachev, Mikhail (1931-): After graduating in law from Moscow State University he returned to his home province of Stavropol and worked his way up the Communist Party bureaucracy. Brought to Moscow as party secretary for agriculture in 1978. He joined the Politburo in 1979, and was appointed General Secretary 1985. Appointed Soviet President in 1989, he left office in December 1991.

Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971): The Soviet leader from 1957-64. He was the last leader prior to Gorbachev who tried to launch serious reforms, for which he was fired.

Nomenklatura The informal name for the top 1-2 million Communist Party officials who ran the party and state bureaucracy.

Politburo The committee with 10-15 members that headed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Yanaev, Gennady (1937-): A trade union leader whom Gorbachev appointed Soviet Vice President. Yanaev headed the committee that declared a state of emergency in August 1991 and had Gorbachev arrested in his vacation villa.

Yeltsin, Boris (1931-): Former construction chief and then party official in the Urals city of Sverdlovsk. Gorbachev appointed him head of the Moscow City Communist party in December 1985, and fired him in 1987. Yeltsin won election to the USSR Congress in 1989, and in 1990 he was elected president by the Russian Republic parliament. He won a direct election for the Russian presidency in June 1991.

CHRONOLOGY

Soviet History

1917 Bolshevik revolution leads to creation of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, formed of 15 republics, and ruled by the Communist Party.

1924 Founder Vladimir Lenin dies, is replaced by Joseph Stalin.

1929-31 Stalin launches a crash industrialization drive and the forced collectivization of peasant farms.

1935-37 Massive purges of potential opponents to Stalin's rule decimates Soviet society and especially the Communist Party officials and Soviet army generals.

1941-45 Nazi invasion causes 27 million Soviet deaths. Stalin emerges victorious and takes over Eastern Europe including East Germany. The Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) are incorporated into the Soviet Union. The Soviet take-over of Eastern Europe launches the Cold War.

1949 The Soviet Union explodes its own atomic bomb.

1953 Stalin dies, he is replaced by a collective leadership in the Politburo, the top organ of the Communist Party's Central Committee.

1956 Nikita Khrushchev, the new Communist Party leader, makes a "secret speech" to the 20th Party Congress denouncing Stalin's purges of innocent victims. Nevertheless, in November 1956 an anti-Soviet uprising in Hungary is ruthlessly repressed.

1957 The Soviet Union launches the Sputnik, the world's first satellite, and puts the first man in space in 1961.

1961 The Soviet Union breaks with Communist China over ideological and strategic differences.

1964-82 The Communist Party is headed by General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, a cautious leader who avoids reform, cracks down on dissidents, and builds up the Soviet nuclear arsenal.

1968 Brezhnev invades Czechoslovakia to prevent the Communist government there from introducing reforms.

1979 Brezhnev invades neighboring Afghanistan to preserve a pro-Soviet government there.

1982-84 Brezhnev dies and is replaced by Yuri Andropov, the former head of the KGB, who starts an anti-corruption drive. He is sick and soon dies.

The start of reforms

1985 May The Politburo appoints the youthful Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary.

November Gorbachev meets US President Ronald Reagan in Geneva.

December Gorbachev appoints the outspoken Boris Yeltsin from Sverdlovsk to head the Moscow City Communist Party, to tackle corruption and inefficiency.

1986 Gorbachev starts campaigns against corruption and alcoholism.

March An explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in Ukraine, the worst nuclear accident in world history, contaminates extensive territory and causes great anxiety in the population.

Gorbachev launches reforms of glasnost (press freedom), perestroika (cautious economic reform), and “new thinking” in foreign policy. He begins arms control talks with U.S. President Ronald Reagan.

1987 January Gorbachev calls for “democratization,” by which he means multiple candidates in elections, while preserving the Communist Party monopoly. It will take him two years to persuade party conservatives to implement this reform.

June A new law on state enterprises weakens central plan controls over the economy.

Summer The first mass demonstrations by nationalists in the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and in Armenia, south of the Caucasus mountains.

November Gorbachev fires Boris Yeltsin, head of the Moscow City Communist Party, for rudeness.

December In Washington Gorbachev signs a treaty under which the US and USSR agree to remove all the medium range nuclear weapons from Europe.

1988 February Demonstrations in the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh lead to attacks on Armenians living in Azerbaijan, and Azeris living in Armenia. By the end of the year 300,000 Armenians and Azerbaijanis flee their homes, and the Soviet Army imposes martial law.

May President Ronald Reagan visits Moscow for the first time; stops talking about “evil empire.”

October Gorbachev has himself appointed President of the Soviet Union.

1989 February The last Soviet troops leave Afghanistan.

March Elections for the new USSR Congress of People’s Deputies see humiliating defeats for Communist Party candidates and the victory of nationalists in the Baltic and Caucasus republics. Yeltsin wins election from the Moscow district. The proceedings of the Congress are televised live.

April Nationalist unrest spreads to Georgia, focusing on the rights of the Abkhaz minority. On April 9 Soviet troops dispersed Georgian protestors in Tbilisi, killing 21, an action condemned by democrats across the Soviet Union and by foreign leaders.

Spring “Round Table” talks between communist leaders and opposition groups in Poland and Hungary leads to the formation of non-communist governments.

June The Hungarian government dismantles the border fences with Austria (the “Iron Curtain”). East German citizens try to get to Hungary, in order to flee to the West.

July A wave of strikes by Russian coalminers forces the government to increase wages and food supplies.

November Opening of the Berlin Wall, meaning an end to travel restrictions for East Germans. Communist governments are toppled in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania.

December The Lithuanian parliament renounces the country’s 1940 incorporation into the Soviet Union.

1990 March Elections to parliaments in the 15 republics that make up the Soviet Union and in regional councils. Pro-democracy deputies form a majority in some key cities, including Moscow.

March The new Lithuanian parliament declares independence. In response Gorbachev declares an economic blockade on Lithuania.

March The USSR Congress abolishes Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution, recognizing the “leading role” of the Communist Party.

March Gorbachev creates a new Federation Council composed of the leaders of the 15 main republics and the 21 ethnic republics within the Russian Republic.

May The Russian Supreme Soviet (parliament) elects Yeltsin as President of the Russian Republic.

June The USSR Congress rejects Gorbachev’s plan to introduce a “regulated market economy,” objecting to the lifting of price controls.

July The 28th Congress of the Communist Party is dominated by conservatives who reject Gorbachev’s reforms. Key radical leaders such as Yeltsin leave the Communist Party.

July Yeltsin declares that the Russian Republic is prepared to adopt the radical ‘500 day plan’ for conversion to a market economy.

September Gorbachev is granted new powers to rule by presidential decree bypassing the USSR Congress, for 18 months. He launches a conservative economic stabilization program.

December Gorbachev creates a new Security Council, with control over KGB, police and army. Liberal Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze resigns, protesting that “a harsh dictatorship is coming.”

The End Game

1991 January The Soviet Army attempts crackdown in Lithuania, killing 13 protestors and triggering protests in Moscow and abroad.

January Many enterprises switch their tax payments to the Russian Federal Republic government, and refuse to send money to the Soviet government.

March Referendum on the preservation of the USSR. The vote is boycotted by Armenia, Moldova, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In the other nine republics 76% of voters approve the idea of preserving a common state.

April Gorbachev and the leaders of nine republics draft a new Union treaty.

April The Soviet government introduces an economic anti-crisis program, with 60% price increases.

June Yeltsin wins election as President of the Russian Federal Republic, gaining 57% support in a free popular vote.

July Leaders of the G7 countries, meeting in London, turn down a proposal for a massive aid package, a new Marshall Plan, for the Soviet Union.

August 19, One day before five republic leaders have agreed to meet and sign the new Union treaty, Gorbachev's own Vice President, Gennady Yanaev, declares a state of emergency and has Gorbachev arrested in his vacation villa.

August 20, Soviet troops refuse to storm the building of the Russian parliament in Moscow, where Boris Yeltsin has taken refuge. Yeltsin calls on all soldiers to obey him as president of the Russian Federation.

August 21, The coup collapses in the face of widespread popular protests. The coup leaders are arrested, and Gorbachev is freed, but Yeltsin refuses to accept the authority of the Soviet government.

December 7-8, Yeltsin meets in Minsk with the presidents of Ukraine and Belarus, Leonid Kravchuk and Stanislav Shushkevich. They agree to create a new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Gorbachev was not present.

December 22, A meeting in Alma Ata sees eight more Soviet republics join the CIS. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Georgia refuse to take part, though Georgia joins in 1992.

December 31, The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics ceases to exist.

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