

What caused the  
collapse of the soviet  
union?



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

What caused the collapse of the Soviet Union?

The Soviet Union had been in power since the 30 December 1922 until 26 December 1991, many leaders had governed the Union but Mikhail Gorbachev had ultimately brought about the fall of the Soviet Union which many had seen as being inevitable due to the series of events occurring in its republics. The size of the Union was much greater than continents such as the North and South America and Europe, with such a size came a large and complex economy which state planners struggled to cope with, this in turn caused economic stagnation which lasted for over a decade. Mikhail Gorbachev saw economic and political reform was essential in order to maintain its superpower status, Perestroika and Glasnost had great intentions however it had negative consequences. Secessionist rebellions started to develop and grow in size and frequency, there was great unrest at the time, economic stagnation was a result of a lack of economic incentives, growing nationalist support in the satellite states and Russia itself and the discovery of the secret protocols in the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact ultimately led to a domino effect of disbandment within the empire. Nationalism was a major cause of the collapse of communism, assertion of national sovereignty in one area of the empire set off a wave throughout the Soviet Union which set in motion another chain of events in another region, these interrelated events catalysed the collapse of the Union as it instilled further confidence in those who sought sovereignty.

The policy of glasnost and the political liberalisation produced as a consequence of glasnost was one of the essential conditions that allowed the fall of communism to happen. The key forces that brought about the collapse

of the Union could not have acted without the introduction of glasnost. The result of Gorbachev's policies allowed a broader political space that opposing political forces used to further their objectives. Of the early years of perestroika Gorbachev stated ' We talked not about revolution, but about improving the system. Then we believed in such a possibility.' <sup>1</sup> Gorbachev's aim was not to dismantle the root of communism in the Soviet Union, it was to put an end to the cold war by improving international relations as Gorbachev knew his economy's strength was not proportional to the military's budget which money was greatly needed in other sectors of the economy. Communism was dismantled not only as result of Gorbachev's policies, but also due to opposition utilising opportunities created from these policies allowing them to transform institutions, strengthen in political power and catalyse national mobilisation.

What mobilised populations in the Soviet Union was precisely nationalism. Issues of democratisation, labour unrest and consumer shortages led to catalysed mobilisation in the Soviet Union. Multiple protest demonstrations throughout the empire during the glasnost period highlighted that nationalism gained a unique force not experienced by other factors of causing collapse. Demonstrations expressed nationalist demands three times more than those expressing democratising demand, those who combined both democratising and nationalist demands were five times more likely to mobilise. Soviet society's movements for democratisation could not have been as successful without nationalist demands as it underpinned demands for liberalisation which without this would have a minimal impact on Soviet citizens. Great decline in living standards caused the people to

demonstrate on the basis of economic demands however nationalist demands still allowed for greater progress in furthering national sovereignty.

<sup>2</sup> People were unusually attracted to the idea of nationalism in Soviet society, this idea was greatly supported, much more than the other sets of issues in the empire.

Much deeper causes which dated back to the brutal Stalin-era which was rooted in Soviet history and the misinformed public of significant events in the past led to a strong motivation to mobilise during the glasnost period. The era of Brezhnev til Gorbachev's succession to general secretary in March 1985 led to a crippled political system, a stagnated economy and entrenched corruption in the ruling elite. Even ordinary Russians couldn't find much resemblance with the Soviet elite, and it seemed as though the ruling class had been classed as foreign and dissociated to Russian and Eastern culture.

<sup>3</sup> originally the communist regime presented itself as an internationalist revolution however behind this facade was truly Russia exerting its dominance on Eastern Europe, evidence for this is that a once a diverse and proportionally represented state converted into disproportionate Russian elites. <sup>4</sup>

Up until glasnost, secessionist rebellions teetered on the margins of Soviet society, including the Baltic states as Soviet control had seemed as something that wouldn't and couldn't change and ' a permanent state of affairs'. <sup>5</sup> When glasnost was introduced, preliminarily it had no strong nationalist ingredient in which a sociologist from Estonia realised, ' neither its chief architects nor the broad public were prepared for the possible rise of

national movements.'<sup>6</sup> Glasnost influenced and changed official institutions entirely, the newspapers, television and key government branches. By Spring 1987, glasnost had spiralled out of control, glasnost developed past official control and small groups of minorities tested the Government by taking politics and freedom of speech to the streets, these were the very few demonstrations which sparked a fire that grew exponentially over time. But by the middle of 1989, large-scale nationalist demonstrations had propped up in great quantities, hundreds of thousands of protestors flooded the streets of the republics especially the baltic states which became a recurring event. By this time the constraints imposed by government institutions had on the whole faded away and nationalist mobilisations had evolved into a self-determining precursor of events, altering the role of political establishments instead of being restricted by them. one year after the deployment of glasnost, the first significant breakthroughs of nationalism appeared in the Soviet Union, the Karabakh protests which gathered over a million people in one area alone. From February 1988 to August 1989 an epidemic of nationalist mobilisations popped up namely the Baltic states, Ukraine and Moldova. The extent of USSR control had been minimized by nationalist movements in the Baltic states especially Estonia and the failed attempt to control the events which occurred in Azerbaijan and Armenia. Tbilisi had great mobilisations and the USSR responded with military suppression however this made things worse as the backlash that the USSR received completely undermined Soviet control in that satellite state, this caused many to question whether military action should be utilised as a way to contain revolts. Soviet instability was extensive and this provided a unique opportunity for eastern europeans in late 1989. ' The peoples of Poland,

<https://assignbuster.com/what-caused-the-collapse-of-the-soviet-union/>

Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia have said no to communist dictatorship', an example of what banners read at protests. <sup>7</sup> Approximately 2 million people joined their hands to form a human chain which was known as the "Baltic Way" in favour of sovereignty, if the Baltic states manages to get away with declaring independence why should the other republics not push forward their own political objectives of independence against their restraining regimes? The downfall of communism in Europe greatly catalysed the spur of nationalist revolts, leading to an underlying feeling that the Kremlin could no longer contain its republics.

Gorbachev would attend meetings and would tell them how it is, he acknowledged the problems in the country and didn't give a flowery assessment of the Soviet state like each and every other Kremlin official. The party eventually voted Gorbachev in as they thought he would've been a great face and leader for the problematic state however they swiftly regretted this, Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and in six years the Soviet Union was dissolved. He wanted reform, he wanted to make the state ethical but it turned into an utter disaster and near the end he became politically irrelevant and tossed aside by the ruling elite, the Russian people had great ambiguity towards Gorbachev and some people had deep hatred for him. The oil price crisis in the 80s was detrimental to the economy, the price of oil dropped profoundly and in the midst of Gorbachev reforms this made matters worse, the economy worsened throughout Gorbachev's reign and worsened to a horrible degree undermining his popularity and legitimacy as a leader of the USSR. In fact the Soviet Union tried to supercede the Soviet

identity over and ethnic identity, as though people would identify as Soviets instead of identifying themselves as their nations.

This self-identification as a Soviet person was supposed to triumph over petty squabbles of nationalism however this had no effect, the Soviet Union was a nation of republics under the rule of the communist party and once this rule relaxed its control things began to unravel. When Gorbachev introduced glasnost and freedom of speech he couldn't fathom that the Soviet Union could break apart as it was all he knew, he was somewhat naive as he wanted to be seen as a positive leader in history by giving his people freedom and in return gain public admiration. Nationalism was beginning to rear its head across the Soviet Socialist Republics, people wanted more autonomy, more power, away from the central government and what was truly standing there in between them and the fulfillment of that was the Communist party. Russian culture was the governing culture but Russian nationalism was not the foundation of the Soviet Union for example, the main church of Russia is the Russian orthodox church and Poland was strongly Roman Catholic. In fact the Soviet state crushed Russian nationalism in any political form whatsoever and so for the country that invented Communist government to abandon strict socialism was much less feasible. If one was to open up an industry to the free market it mostly wouldn't be competitive and if one attempted to reform industry within the USSR it would've been too difficult because it had been working in the context of Government state plans, a part of a huge bureaucracy. People were not used to operating a business, they had lived in a country where

private property in many cases were outlawed and any conducting business was illegal.

Stagnation in the Soviet Union was a great factor as to why the the Union collapsed, in the 1970s the empire plunged into economic stagnation in which it would never escape from. Gorbachev started reprimanding the 'stagnation' and 'negative tendencies' of the Brezhnev routine and in this way reorienting the Soviet Association towards the policy of Acceleration.<sup>8</sup> At around a similar time, Gorbachev additionally started a shake-up of the administration (the appointing of young politicians with more radical views), an inclination which persevered all through the following five years. In addition to other things, the Chernobyl atomic blast on April 26th flagged the destabilization of the Soviet framework - innovative backwardness, a careless mentality towards the environment and an absence of political obligation.<sup>9</sup> Surely, the Gorbachev authority, baffled with the consequences of the policy of acceleration, bolstered a push towards progression of both the financial and political circle, which was to re-strengthen the nation, include the majority, and make an increasingly humane arrangement of administration and life. June 1987, for instance, saw the first multi-candidate elections, aimed for expanding political interest and democracy.<sup>10</sup> Instantly a short time later, the communist economy started to be changed by decentralisation and the development of agreeable endeavors. Be that as it may, the changes would be in general conflict with the arrangement of state arranging, cost control, and sponsorships, bringing about expanding financial challenges which were swiftly translated by the initiative as proof of the need to extend political freedom.<sup>11</sup> It raised ethnic concerns, which turned out to

<https://assignbuster.com/what-caused-the-collapse-of-the-soviet-union/>



be progressively genuine and negative to harmony, starting with uproars in the Armenian-commanded Azerbaijan.<sup>12</sup> Much of the time, Moscow-forced military intervention channelled even more disgust and hatred towards the Kremlin. After 1988, with a crumbling economy and expanding shakiness, confidence in the Soviet framework melted away and it turned out to be progressively evident that the USSR was going towards collapse. Nationality began assuming an expanding job in household legislative issues as political fighting broke out between republics, autonomies, and the government. Popular Front associations were shaped in the Baltic Republics (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia), requesting sovereignty and, soon after, freedom. With the establishing of the Congress of People's Appointees as a just Union, parliaments in individual republics were changed and democratized.<sup>13</sup> In the midst of the fall of socialist routines in Eastern Europe, Gorbachev would not get involved in saving the Soviet Empire, which was undergoing terminal decay.

The political and financial changes in the USSR energized developments in other Warsaw Pact countries to make similar requests. In his 1988 visit to Poland, Gorbachev clarified that he had no expectation of utilizing military power to prop up the Socialist influence there, in a striking takeoff from the Brezhnev doctrine. He followed up with a noteworthy speech to the UN in December 1988, promising to pull back a huge number of Soviet troops, artillery and tanks from Eastern Europe, so as to guarantee the world that the USSR never again had substantial scale for hostile military objectives in Europe. This Soviet policy move debilitated the negotiating power of the Polish SSR, which consented to let the autonomous association Solidarity

(Solidarnosc) run candidates against them in free decisions in April 1989.

Solidarity had since quite a while ago gotten secret money and help from the Vatican and the USA, empowering it to survive long enough to achieve this accomplishment. At last, be that as it may, the result was in the hands of the Polish electorate, who were generally expected to support the USSR. Rather than that, Solidarity applicants incredibly won each challenged seat, having been outspent significantly by their adversaries. In spite of the fact that the Reagan administration absolutely assumed a role in the help of Solidarity, however it was insufficient for them to have satisfactory election financing; there was little desire for a prompt domino effect as dramatic as what really happened. Foreign intelligence experts that year gave no hint that regime topple in East Germany was a reasonable possibility. Undoubtedly, months go before the fall of the Berlin Wall, which was the quick catalyst of comparable uprisings in surrounding satellite states. The USSR declined to intervene in any of these revolutions, as it was at that point focused on withdrawal from Eastern Europe as a whole. A key to the accomplishment of national anti-Communist developments was the refusal of the Soviets to apply military power to maintain control. Differing factors went into this decision, including the relative expense and advantage of direct military occupation, the shortcomings uncovered in Afghanistan, and the more radical tendencies of Gorbachev. It isn't clear how much of the USSR territory would have been able to be retained by force, yet they unquestionably settled on a purposeful key choice in giving up all of it. As far as concerns them, Socialist governments were under prominent weight not to depend on foreign military help, so they requested Soviet withdrawal as a last endeavor to save the authenticity of their standard. In the event that the Soviets

<https://assignbuster.com/what-caused-the-collapse-of-the-soviet-union/>

trusted the Socialist regimes would make due without military influence, this ended up being a great error of judgement.

In 1990, the Association itself started to go into disrepair, with Lithuania announcing autonomy first in March.<sup>14</sup> Inside a year, greater support for safeguarding the Union remained, however requests for power and decentralization were significantly higher. For the most part, the general population needed a free confederation of republics intentionally designating certain restricted forces to the Union. In the midst of all these wild changes that the Gorbachev initiative neglected to manage, 'conservative' party members, for example, the leaders of the Military and KGB accepted what they saw as the last opportunity to safeguard the Soviet Union. On August 19, 1991 they framed an unlawful Emergency Committee, putting Gorbachev on house arrest and declaring military law.<sup>15</sup> In any case, their absence of efficient organisation turned out to be rapidly clear as they neglected to secure both mainstream backing and powerful forces from state administrations; the coup broke down after three days. The overthrow added to enormous discontent with the Soviet Association and the Socialist Party, Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia annulled the Union in a semi-lawful measure known as the Belavezha Accords. They founded an unsecured Confederation of Independent States which replaced the USSR on December 31, 1991.

Politically, the nature of reform has been viewed as damaging due to the way that it hurt the Socialist Party and permitted the development of options against the regime. This had never been done before. Empowering more radical political options Gorbachev's reforms uncovered the emptiness of

Soviet political authenticity and the USSR fell into a legitimization trap that past Soviet rulers had kept away from. Gorbachev, in the event that he had pushed reform in an alternate way, could have evaded it as well. In such a system emergencies were helpful to the party since they empowered it to make decisions about what ought to occur straight away and to act to resolve this; they empowered the party to act in a heroic way, supporting its case that the Soviet Union was essential for its satellite states simultaneously. However this, as a sociologist noted, 'aggravates the intellectual powerlessness of the authorities in crisis situations' since they proved unable legitimately to distinguish or manage the majority of the political crises in its satellite states.<sup>16</sup> Crucially, they couldn't go up against the degree to which issues were a result of the USSR's desire and dysfunctions. Thus, issues for the most part went unsolved since tending to them completely would undermine the grounds on which the state legitimated itself.

The end of détente was sometimes credited to President Reagan, it was really President Carter who originally continued an unfriendly position against the USSR in 1979, boycotting the Moscow Olympics, preparing guerrillas to oppose the Soviet intrusion of Afghanistan, and utilizing the Soviet threat as a defense for expanded military spending. All things considered, this was generally a mild strain in contrast to the Cold War. Amid the early years of his administration, Reagan utilized intense rhetoric about the "evil empire", setting up an ill-disposed position toward the USSR, clearly deserting the approach of détente. His fierce tone made many dread he would steer the world toward a reiteration of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

These feelings of dread were not quieted by Reagan's great military spending, especially in nuclear weaponry, nor by his scandalous Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). In spite of the fact that the SDI should end the dread of nuclear war, numerous political experts saw the "star wars" program as conceivably destabilizing and destructive of disarmament agreements. Disturbingly, SDI could be translated as Reagan's endeavor to make nuclear war "winnable". Regardless of Reagan's evident aggressiveness, he never engaged with the USSR in a standoff that included increasing the country's nuclear caution. His SDI never emerged, however it was considered important between high ranking Soviet military officials.<sup>17</sup> Reagan's extreme military spending may have in a roundabout way hurt the Soviet economy, however it likewise reinforced the hardline components of the regime. Amid the Reagan period, Soviet military spending did not apparently increase as a percentage of GNP.<sup>18</sup> Still, the Reagan development made gravely required decreases in military spending politically unfeasible. The American president's unfriendly position fortified the hand of Soviet hardliners against the changes of Gorbachev, and prompted a more noteworthy Soviet emphasis on nuclear weapons. Consequently Reagan's strategy effectively affected some parts of the USSR, however not in the slightest bit did Reagan drive the Soviets' hand. They were allowed to react to his dangers in an assortment of ways, and decided approach as indicated by their own inner workings. The facts might prove that the USSR couldn't contend with the USA in a weapons contest, or possibly in specific parts of an arms race, however this isn't sufficient to represent the loss of its Eastern European domain and its own disintegration.<sup>19</sup>

The Soviet Union underwent a series of crises which ultimately led to the dissolution on the 25<sup>th</sup> December 1991. Economic stagnation, political instability, the Chernobyl disaster, the cold war and military all led to overwhelming discontent in its republics. These factors all led to a spark of nationalist movements and catalysed it further with crisis after crisis eventually leading to the Baltic states declaring independence. The main cause of the Soviet demise was nationalism, the empire failed to make the Soviet republics feel as though they are part of one ethnicity, their nationalist roots were embedded in them this whole time and it was only a matter of time until the Soviet Union failed on delivering what its republics needed and wanted. Nationalism grew exponentially in the late-80s which like the domino effect led to a wave of independence declarations and coups throughout its territories which ultimately brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union.

<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i reformy*, Vol. I (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), 203

<sup>2</sup> Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization*, 75-9

<sup>3</sup> Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State*

<sup>4</sup> Philip G. Roeder, *Red Sunset: The failure of Soviet Politics*

<sup>5</sup> Andrejs Plakans, *The Latvians: A Short History*, p. 162

<sup>6</sup> K. S. Hallik, quoted in *Pravda*, 7 June 1989, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ekspress khronika, no 51, 17 December 1989.

<sup>8</sup> I. A. Adamova and I. M. Zinkova, 27th Congress of the CPSU: The Leading Role of the Party in Accelerating the Country's Development, 11.

<sup>9</sup> David Marples, The Collapse of the Soviet Union, 1985-1991), 20-24

<sup>10</sup> Smith, The Fall of Soviet Communism: 1985-91, 114.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Knight, Stalinism in Crisis, 15-21

<sup>12</sup> Edward W. Walker, Dissolution: Sovereignty and the Breakup of the Soviet Union, 57.

<sup>13</sup> J. S. Duncan, " The Collapse of the Soviet Union was a Revolution from Below," in The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union, 147.

<sup>14</sup> David Marples, " The Fall of the USSR: The National Dimension and the Role of Ukraine

<sup>15</sup> David Remnick, Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire

<sup>16</sup> Jadwiga Staniszkis (1992, p. 86)

<sup>17</sup> Mira Duric, Strategic defence initiative: US policy and the Soviet Union, p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> According to U. S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, " World military Expenditures and Arms Transfers," 1995

<sup>19</sup> A Comparison of Soviet and US Defense Activities, 1973-87," CIA, July 1988.