

History of the collapse of the soviet union



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How can one explain the disintegration and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence?

The disintegration and collapse of the Soviet Union was the result of a complex combination of internal and external pressures which had been building for decades. Economic decline, strong currents of indigenous nationalism, corruption and the systematic deligitimization of the central authority and Communist ideology all contributed to an environment of internal pressure, doubt and cynicism. Externally, the Soviet Union's foreign policy had led it into a tense and costly confrontation with the West, both socially and militarily. The combination of these internal and external pressures forced the Soviet Union into an untenable position, no longer able to maintain control through a sense of legitimacy and lacking the will to exact it through force.

Many were surprised not only at the speed with which the USSR unraveled, but also at how quickly nationalist movements and organizations were able to move forward with popular support and structure in such a short amount of time. The pressures that had been building show the collapse of the Soviet Union to have been more akin to a dam breaking, releasing pent up pressure and momentum that had been merely held back. What made the disintegration and collapse of the Soviet Union so remarkable was not just the convergence of so many complex factors to necessitate its failure, but the means and manner in which its broken parts responded.

It must be remembered that the Soviet Union was an empire. As Gerhard Simon Points out in *Aussenpolitik*, it was the first of its kind, held together

by a party and a commitment to ideology. As a result “ The Soviet Union was not perceived in the context of the other empires which had fallen apart in Europe... The USSR, on the other hand, ranked in the West as a ‘ normal’ state... The Soviet Union, however, was simply not a normal state.” (Simon, 2000) It was based upon the legitimacy of its party and its ideology. The systematic deterioration of this legitimacy served as one of the main factors in its disintegration and collapse. It was the weakening of the dam itself, so to speak. The actions of its satellite states represent the impulses of newly freed captives, not the heartless abandonment of their mother-state.

The pressures against the dam, however, reach back into the early 20th century. Simon identifies the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 as an effective reassertion of the Russian empire following the First World War.

Furthermore, he argues that it *arrested* the nationalistic movements taking shape among the recently freed peoples’ of post-imperial Russia. These nationalist movements, of major ethnic and cultural significance for many, were not stamped out under the Soviet system of control and oppression. They were merely pushed underground. They spent the better part of the 20th century building momentum from within the Soviet system until the internal pressures, exerted in so many directions and ways, could no longer be contained. (Simon, 2000) This explains how quickly and eagerly the different satellite states declared independence and moved toward Western models of government and economy. “ The causes for the downfall are rooted, on the one hand, in the design errors of the Soviet system and, on the other hand, in the process of degeneration which had been undermining stability for decades.” (Simon, 2000)

The currents of nationalism within the Soviet Union were intensified and gained strength as Stalin's controls were gradually loosened and the legitimacy of the Communist Party began to suffer in public view as information began to flow more freely. Nationalist sentiment coincided with social events in the 50's and 60's where laborers from the Soviet Gulag returned home and began to talk with long-lost friends and relatives about what had happened to them. (Hosking, 1991) This began to affect public perceptions and attitudes for the first time. People of like mind began meeting privately in their homes to talk and listen to Western radio. Eventually, the dissemination of unofficial literature, known as *Samizdat*, began. A culture of covert associations and hidden groups emerged. They began to grow covertly in response to the systematic persecution of intellectuals and dissidents. These groups and associations eventually began operating openly in the late 80's, only to add to the tremendously diverse pressures pulling at the Soviet Union. (Hosking, 1991)

As nationalist sentiments began to gain strength from such a 'social awakening', they quickly learned that their energies were best spent organizing within the Soviet system. Different national movements had gained strength and led to uprisings in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The Soviets put them down quickly and brutally. (Fowkes, 1993) "[The] party leadership had no qualms about forcibly helping their ideological presumptions become reality..." (Simon, 2000)

Combined with the 'social awakening', and the currents of nationalism running through the USSR, was the systematic deligitimisation of its system. "During the 1950's the Soviet middle class became increasingly optimistic

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about the performance of the Soviet system and about its own prospects for material betterment... In the 1970's it has given way to pessimism. The rise and decline of middle-class optimism can be linked in part to political developments, but the crucial determinant has been the changing perception of Soviet economic performance." (Dallin & Laepidus, 1995)

Ruled by ideology, the failure to meet economic goals and expectations constituted a significant crisis of confidence for many and a serious blow to the legitimacy of collectivist economic philosophy.

The political developments that contributed to the deterioration of Soviet legitimacy had to do with a dissonance between ideology and practice. The conflicts of Krushchev's 'de-Stalinisation' gave way to political rifts which exposed key divisions in government. This dis-unity was damaging to public confidence and to Soviet political legitimacy. It became a habit for the new Soviet leader to deal with his problems by casting blame and criticism upon his predecessor. "All successors have dissociated themselves along similar lines from their respective predecessors, declared them to be unpersons, and thus contributed considerably to the delegitimation of the Soviet system." (Simon, 2000) The establishment of this practice had an extremely detrimental effect upon the public perception, resulting in a more entrenched cynicism toward politics in general and political leadership.

Furthermore, this cynicism became even more deeply rooted in the social and political culture as Brezhnev's Soviet Union saw the spread of corruption invade almost every corner of Soviet life. "The Soviet Union is infected from top to bottom with corruption – from the worker who gives the storeman a bottle of vodka to get the best job, to the politburo candidate Mzhavanadze

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who takes hundreds of thousands of rubles for protecting underground millionaires; from the street prostitute, who pays the policeman ten rubles so that he won't prevent her from soliciting clients, to the former member of the Politburo Ekaterina Furtseva, who built a luxurious suburban villa at the government's expense – each and everyone is afflicted with corruption.”

(Dallin & Laepidus, 1995)

The lack of legitimacy by itself was not enough to dissolve the Soviet Union, as no single issue probably could have been, but it was enough to make everyone look to themselves. Public cynicism combined with deep graft and corruption at all levels made for a political system held together simply by control. Within this system the communal ideal was effectively dead.

Everyone looked to cut corners, everyone looked for a bigger piece of a zero-sum pie. The Soviet Union saw the development of competing interests within itself rooted in a system of corruption. Combined with the currents of nationalism, who were cut short in their bid for self-determination, and the social underground harboring forbidden ideas and conversations and publications, this in-fighting proved to be the final element of a political picture which had lost its fundamental integrity.

From a foreign policy point of view, this is also when the Soviet Union came to be known as the ' Evil Empire'. With the gradual relaxation of Stalin's controls came an increased flow of uncontrolled information between the Soviet Union and the West. The turning of international sentiment against the Soviet Union in the late 70's and early 80's, as the truths of their social and political system made their way into the international mainstream, only served to heighten the moral legitimacy of the West in confronting Soviet

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Ambitions abroad. Before that, the American political spectrum remained solidly divided over how best to engage the USSR. After the moral clarity issued by the facts of such an indictment, the West was far less sympathetic and much more aggressive in applying all the external pressure it could. The socialist/communist intelligentsia in the West lost credibility and standing, while the political mainstream in both America and Europe both saw thwarting Soviet ambitions as a strategic, and more importantly, a *moral* imperative.

With a moral mandate to challenge Soviet interests across the globe, the Americans committed fully to maintaining their military and technological advantage, and dealt with little opposition from within their own political system. At the height of the arms race, it is estimated that the Soviet Union allocated anywhere from “ at least 15 percent” (Dallin & Laepidus, 1995) to 25 percent (Simon, 2000) of their budget to defense spending. This represented huge external pressure to an already struggling Soviet economy beign outperformed by its Western counterparts.

The economic difficulties of the Soviet system were masked initially as steady growth in the 1950's led to a sense of optimism. From that point onward, Soviet growth continued to decline. “ One reason was that earlier on, inputs-capital, labor, energy-had been ample and cheap. By the 1970's this was no longer so...” (Dallin & Laepidus, 1995) Furthermore, Dallin and Laepidus note that “ productivity was low, and the system failed to provide adequate incentives for harder work of for technological innovation.” So in addition to the economic circumstances of declining growth, the Soviet system had no way of increasing the productivity of its workers or the

creativity of its technology industry. “ Above all, the motivating effect of the market, competition and profit could not be replaced by any system of allocation and control, regardless of how sophisticated it may have been. Initiative, creativity and the striving for profit maximisation drifted into the shadow economy and corruption after the disciplining and deterrent effects of Stalinist terror had ceased to be effective.” (Simon, 2000) And so while the economy declined, the quality of goods and services continued to decline as well. (Notice the conspicuous absence of historical market demand for Soviet goods) The Soviet system had killed off or driven away the very tools it needed to recover. Or from the point of view of Hillel Ticktin, who famously predicted the failure of perestroika and accurately described the long denied economic realities of the then-current Soviet system, they had put themselves in a position (according to Communist ideology) where they needed to “ defeat the working class” and return them to the conditions under which they had been exploited before. (Ticktin, 1992) It is a cruel irony, indeed, that the very pronouncements of the ideology that sustained their political order walked hand in hand with their economic doom.

In the late 80’s the sum of all the factors discussed here proved too great. The nationalist movements the Bolshevik revolution had arrested in mid-development were driven underground but ultimately endured within the Soviet system, waiting to release a momentum held back by years of Soviet control. These sentiments found friendly ears in the social underground that developed as information began to flow more freely after the gradual relaxation of Stalin’s controls. This underground only continued to grow as the oppressed and free-thinking individuals of the Soviet Union continually

sought refuge in association with one another. These two elements only reinforced the sense of lost legitimacy following the economic setbacks of the mid-20th century and the political divisions that showed the first cracks in the Soviet political system. The the general sense of a loss of legitimacy was a critical blow that aided the widespread proliferation of a deep and contagious corruption which came to partially define and become engrained in the culture.

This corruption struck at the heart of all the mechanisms the Soviet Union needed to right itself, but it was at the same time a consequence of the system itself. They had, in the course of their committment to their ideology, abandoned the necesssary tools to successfully recover and advance their economy. The social forces of discontent, the nationalist sentiments and social underground, combined with economic factors to present significant internal difficulties. And as Soviet foreign policy demanded a share of defense spending four times larger than that of the United States (as a percentage of GNP), external pressures combined with internal pressures to literally put the Soviet system in a pressure cooker.

By the time Gorbechev's came through with perestroika, the myriad social and political interests at odds with one another, combined with the deep cynicism and scorn for the Soviet system rooted in the social underground, proved too much. There was no social consensus or any real momentum for support. " The political and social contiguity of the Soviet political system had been broken long ago. " For the first time since the revolution of 1917, society, rather than the state, was driving the process of change in Soviet life. But that society was increasingly fragmented, fractious, and polarized, <https://assignbuster.com/history-of-the-collapse-of-the-soviet-union/>

pitting radical democrats against die-hard communists and nationalists of all kinds against Soviet “ patriots.” In this setting Gorbachev found himself reacting to multiple and conflicting pressures in an effort, growing ever more desperate, to hold the country together.” (Strayer, 1998)

The final years of the Soviet system were spent with the political leadership desperately trying to hold it together. But it could never survive the collapse of its political order because it was under the very pretext of that political order that the Soviet Union came to power. “[The] Communist party had reconstituted the empire and developed the instruments of rule, which meant that, following the party’s loss of power, there was no other force to hold the empire together.” (Simin, 2000) Meanwhile, the political alternatives that had been developing and taking shape within the Soviet system itself, the national movements which never came to fruition, provided the impetus to break free from the Soviet system. As new declarations of independence were proclaimed, one after the other, “ the consequence of decades of pent-up energy” (Simon, 2000) ensured that the struggle for nationhood which began after the fall of the first Russian Empire, would continue after the second.

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