

Why did the soviet
union collapse?



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More than two decades have passed since the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics disappeared from the world political stage. Starting with 1985, the internal situation of the Soviet Union, as well as its international status, began to experience breathtakingly fast and radical change, which eventually led to its collapse in 1991, event probably commemorated today only by Vladimir Putin, who describes it as ‘ the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century’ (annual state-of-the-nation address to Parliament, Moscow, April the 29th, 2005, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty). There are many controversial debates about the actual reasons that caused the collapse of the vast Soviet ‘ Empire’, but one thing is certain: they cannot be reduced to one single factor, as for an historical event of such calibre to happen, it took the interaction of many factors, producing a set of circumstances that made the change urgent and inevitable. In the following essay, I shall present and argue the main factors that contributed to – and can be described as reasons for – the end of the Soviet Union.

To begin with, we are talking about a disintegration process with different origins and extremely intense dynamics. The systemic involution had actually begun in February 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev struck the deadly blow against the myth of Stalin’s inerrability (February 25, 1956: Khrushchev’s ‘ Secret Speech’, denouncing Stalin’s abuses). It was followed by other disillusionments, which would undermine the myths of the irreversibility and invincibility of the communist order.

The economic problems of the USSR were asking for desperate measures, the society was becoming more and more corrupt, harsh, and inefficient, the sole existence of the USSR as a union was starting to be questioned. After

the removal of Khrushchev from power in 1964, Leonid Brezhnev was appointed his successor. The economic crisis that engulfed the Soviet Union and the majority of the socialist states in the 1970s spread to the following decade. The reform surrogates consecutively introduced by the communist leaders failed to optimize the economy and release tension in social relations. The soviet socialism model proved to be completely inadequate, considering that the world was about to enter - as Jeremy Rifkin calls it - the third industrial revolution. Yuri Andropov (1982-1984) appeared to be trying to put into practice a reform policy, but was confronted by the inflexibility of the superior political structures and resistance from the bureaucratic system installed by Brezhnev.

But shortly after the death of Konstantin Cernenko, on March the 11th 1985, in Moscow, a new leader emerged, animated by reforming ideas, under the aegis of Mikhail Gorbachev. The Soviet Union was confronting grave issues at the time Gorbachev took over, and they were all exacerbated by the immense quantum of military expenditures. The new General Secretary was quite cautious at the beginning, apparently proving to be consequent to his predecessors, but he then rapidly proceeded to consolidating his power, replacing, in a few weeks time, much of the governing team, and casting away his main rivals. This was meant to pave the way to Gorbachev's reforms.

It started with the Central Committee plenum of the CPSU in April 1985, where Gorbachev brought forward the principles of the policy he intended to put into practice in the Soviet Union, in an attempt to save the communist system by implementing a slow liberalizing process that would lead to the

abolition of the system's most heinous features, without destroying its ideological fundamentals. That policy bears the name of perestroika, or restructuring. In his vision, the soviet system had deviated from the Leninist theory, and needed a reorganization based on reforming the political and economic systems, and 'improving the system of social relations, above all economic' (Kommunist, no. 5, 1985, as cited in Sakwa, R., 1999, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 424). The main goal of perestroika was to demolish the consequences of the Brezhnev era (famously described as an era of economic stagnation), so Gorbachev decided to adopt a strategy of 'rapid acceleration (uskorenie) in the rate of growth, confident of the command economy's potential to deliver it' (Acton, E. and Stableford T., 2007, *The Soviet Union: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY*, vol. 2: 1939-1991, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, p. 384). Applying this concept relied entirely on the support of the society, but conscious of the obstacles standing in his way, the soviet leader took a set of measures in order to stop the nomenclature who would have wanted to prevent these reforms from happening.

A general view of this vision could be summarized in this extract from Gorbachev, M. S., 1987, *PERESTROIKA: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*, London: Collins, p. 66:

'I am pleased that there's a growing understanding, both within the Party and in the society as a whole, that we have started an unprecedented political, economic, social and ideological endeavour. If we are to implement everything we have planned, we must also carry out unprecedented political, economic, social and ideological work in both the internal and external

spheres. Above all, we bear an unprecedented responsibility. And we are aware of the need for large-scale and bold efforts, especially at the first stage.'

In any case, the contradictions and limits of perestroika prevented the political system from being reformed. Therefore, there was a radical difference between what the initiator of the reforms wanted and what the final result was.

Another important component of the reforming policy Gorbachev was introduced in 1986, and is called glasnost (openness), which meant gradually abolishing censorship, introducing political transparency and freedom of the media, which was a gate to elucidating the problems that were blocked, or remained unsolved for decades. The freedom a person had to publicly express a point of view which, not many years ago, would have had him deported in gulags (or even sentenced to death, in Stalin's time), became an ordinary right thanks to glasnost. Soviet newspapers could criticize the government policy, the CPSU, and even Gorbachev himself.

Yet remarkable were the results of perestroika in the external relations. He was convinced that this program could not be fulfilled unless the country's international relations radically changed. Indeed, the USSR started redrawing its essential external policy. Together with his External Affairs Minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, Gorbachev managed to practically revolutionize the soviet external policy, enjoying great sympathy around the world. He introduced a new political thinking, based on a few components: external policy no longer needed to be reasoned and led through the ideological

factor; the conflict between the 2 superpowers, USSR and USA, was non-productive, and military power did not automatically guarantee national security; the soviet state needed to revise its external objectives. Signing an agreement with China on the issue of the oriental borderline, his propositions to limit nuclear and conventional armaments, and drawing off his troops in Afghanistan, made Gorbachev look like a man who was promising peace.

Furthermore, at the European Council in Strasbourg, he admitted that there is no such thing as an unchangeable social system, and suggested that such transformations could occur in Eastern Europe. This signal was also received in Eastern European states, not only in the West. His declaration was widely interpreted as a green light to the reformers in Eastern Europe, in their efforts to implement a democratic system and a market economy, but especially, it dispelled the fear of the intervention of the Big Brother (the name Hélène Carrère d'Encausse gives to the Soviet Union) to end the reforms.

Another important step in the democratization of the USSR was made in 1989, with the election of a new Soviet Parliament, the Congress of People's Deputies. These were not free elections like the ones in the West, taking into consideration that 90% of the candidates were members of the CPSU and other political parties were strictly forbidden. But these elections offered the people the possibility to choose their candidates, and the vote counting had been correctly done. It was definitely the closest thing to democratic elections since 1917.

Yet despite the radical reforms adopted in the USSR, no one anticipated the fundamental changes that were about to happen in Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991.

Poland was the first country in Eastern Europe where Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost turned into an anticommunist revolution. The non-violent Polish break-up with a totalitarian regime was made possible by the existence of both governing and opposition elites, who understood the necessity of such a compromise. The final closure of the communist era in postwar Poland was done in December 1990, with the election of Lech Walesa as president. The Polish events in 1988-1989 had a substantial impact on the entire region.

Hopes were reborn in Hungary, as in the spring of 1990, elections were held and won by the Democratic Forum, which led to overthrowing the communist power through the will of the people.

In Czechoslovakia, the collapse of the communist regime was done by what the historians and public opinion know as The Velvet Revolution. Active opposition became visible since early 1989, when demonstrations were held throughout the country, and just as expected, democratic forces would take over later that year.

The regime collapse in East Germany came as a natural consequence of the events rapidly taking place in the soviet bloc. In late October and early November 1989, hundreds of thousands of protesters went out on the streets of East German cities, demanding their rights. On November the 9th,

the Berlin Wall, the main symbol of both German separation and the Cold War, was demolished.

In Bulgaria, in December 1989, the communist leader T. Jivkov was arrested and the Communist Party changed its name into the Bulgarian Socialist Party, as a symbolic break-up from the Leninist dogmas.

In Romania, unlike other countries in the soviet bloc, communism was overthrown through a violent, open fight. The lack of real opposition within the Communist Party made a peaceful transition impossible. The revolution first started in a city in Western Romania, and was first repressed by the secret police. But a second revolutionary wave broke out on December the 20th, which eventually spread out across the country, breaking the psychological barrier. First encountering militia and army resistance, the huge crowds managed to take over, forcing the Ceausescu dictatorial couple to flee. The communist dictator and his wife were captured, an improvised Court charged them with genocide and impairment of national economy, and the two were finally executed on the Christmas Day in 1989.

1990 was the year in which increasing social convulsion started to lead towards questioning perestroika, as an effect of the resurgence of national consciousness in all the Soviet Republics and satellite states, a factor which Gorbachev had not predicted in his plan to redress the Soviet Union.

Interethnic confrontations arose in all the Soviet Republics, and national conflicts were threatening the cohesion of the USSR. Lithuania proclaimed its independence in March 1990. It was shortly followed by Estonia, Latvia, Georgia and Armenia. Other Republics proclaimed themselves sovereign:

The Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Moldova, Byelorussia, and Ukraine. The laws of the USSR were no longer obeyed, and the leaders of the republics were demanding that the recruits should no longer be incorporated in the Soviet Army.

Aware of the danger, Gorbachev proposed, in February 1990, a new treaty that was to establish a confederation, in order to avoid secession. The Congress of People's Deputies approved the project for a referendum on keeping the Union. The instauration of a new presidential power weighed significantly in the rapid evolution of the national problem.

However, on August the 19th 1991, in Moscow, a group of conservative members of the Politburo who were against the reformation processes, launched what is known today as The August Coup, with the intention of removing Gorbachev from power, but eventually failed. The coup strengthened Boris Yeltsin's position as elected President of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) and leader of the democratic forces, and weakened Gorbachev's position.

Finally, Gorbachev's desperate endeavors to transform the Soviet Union into the Union of Sovereign States, to organize new elections, to rescue his power, ended in failure. The Republics proclaimed their independence after August 1991. On December the 8th 1991, near Minsk, the Presidents of RSFSR, Ukraine and Byelorussia signed an agreement dissolving the Soviet Union and forming the Commonwealth of Independent States. In these given conditions, on December the 25th 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev would resign from the position of president of a state that no longer existed. The Soviet

Union officially ceased to exist starting with December the 31st 1991, 69 years after its establishment.

All in all, my view is that the economic backwardness of the USSR, the failure to effectively implement reforms (reforms which, paradoxically, led to its destruction), the loss of the arms race, and not least, nationalism, formed the main factors that determined the collapse of the Soviet Union. The dismantling of the Empire can be interpreted as an unhappy implosion, deriving from profound internal causes, from the inability of communism to build a viable economy. And the germs of the implosion had laid right in the theses of Gorbachev's - brilliant by some, a non-sense by others - perestroika, in his political actions, as the leader himself is the one who drove the first nails into the coffin, when he demanded the abrogation of article six of the USSR Constitution, which guaranteed the CPSU's supremacy. Gorbachev tried this way to transfer the political power to the Soviets, angering the elder conservative activists. Also, 1989 was the year that practically switched on the genetic immune system of captive nations. The long-dispraised nationalism was the explosive that dashed the Empire of proletarian internationalism to the ground. And yet, the revolution did not fail, considering that we cannot talk about a revolution that is totally triumphant. All the founding myths of that system based on the quasi-religious cult of the single party were shaken, and finally collapsed.