

Assess the main factors leading to the break-up of the Soviet Union

The twentieth century was epitomised by the Cold War, a war between two superpowers of the world, the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), also known as the Soviet Union. This battle between both countries would therefore divide the world into a bipolar system, with the world being divided by two ideological blocs, capitalism and communism, and the Soviet Union being the catalyst behind the latter. However, on the 25th December 1991 the world witnessed a remarkable event where the Soviet flag was lowered, marking the official end of the USSR. The end of the Soviet Union sparked the rise of such theories including the idea of the "New World Order" and more famously, Francis Fukuyama's conception of the "end of history". This concept argues that liberal democracy would become the ultimate ideology that would dominate mankind and become the only form in which to govern. There are many reasons that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The more prominent view of the collapse coincides with the infamous time in power of Mikhail Gorbachev during the 1980s. So, Gorbachev's difficult tenure was a factor in the break-up, however, to analyse this question more effectively, we must look at the broader context of the topic. Indeed, there were 'long' and 'short' term factors which we must consider. Along with the 'internal' and 'external' factors, they all corresponded with each other in the demise of the Soviet Union.

If we consider the 'long term effects' of the eventual destruction of the Union, we can see that the problems lay within the basis of the system that was incorporated in the country. Indeed, the incorporation of the communist ideology within the system was a major factor in the downfall, as well as the inherent structural weaknesses. With the revolution of 1917 and the overthrow of the Tsarist regime, there was a need for the Soviet Union to move ahead in terms of modernisation and 'catch up' with the developing West. With modernisation came the development of a new ideology, Marxism, based on the ideas of German philosopher Karl Marx. This theory of history "grew out of materialist assumptions and dialectic approach. Men are products of their environments in general, and of their economic environment in particular. What is to be explained are... the transformations of one form of society into another- feudalism into capitalism, or capitalism into socialism..." (Sowell, 1985: 46). Indeed, certain aspects of capitalism, for example, exploiting workers, would eventually lead to the collapse of capitalism. Then there would be the development of a communist society in which a 'perfect' order will be established, based on the equal commitment of all members of the community and thus, bringing the end to the class system. Indeed, Bolsheviks, who made up the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, corresponded well with the notion of Marxism thus, the general and popular support at first.

Nevertheless, there were flaws that were evident in this theory. "One of the main reasons why the Communist ideological foundations collapsed was that Marxism... advocated universal, forcible redistribution: paradise on earth was to be achieved by the abolition of property on which the capitalist mode of production was based." (Chubarov, 2001: 45). Indeed, Chubarov furthers his point by noting that capitalism was not at all

as evil as Marx suggested it to be. In essence, Marx failed to see the positives of capitalism and justify its rejection and negative nature towards the concept. Furthermore, his theories failed to convincingly argue the way in which the state would break away to pave way for this 'communist' society. Moreover, his predictions of certain socialist revolutions in Western Europe would eventually prove to be wrong by a distance. Therefore, we can confidently say that the "Communist Party, in which that dream was embodied, had to rely on a 'mixture of ideological illusion and raw coercion.'" (Strayer, 1998: 36).

To refer back to the inherent structural weaknesses of the Soviet Union, we refer back to the political and economic structure that was established by Vladimir Lenin and inherited later on by Joseph Stalin. During Lenin's reign, he sought for a vanguard party as he argued that "a dedicated and professional vanguard would have to foment and guide the revolution on behalf of the proletariat, promoting revolutionary consciousness amongst the workers..." (McCormick, 2010: 205). Moreover, he goes on to argue that the concept of democratic centralism was also needed in the functioning and organisation of the Soviet Union. "It has usually been interpreted as the general electiveness of all Party agencies from the top to bottom, and the strict subordination of the same agencies from the bottom to top. In theory this principle was gradually disseminated within the state structure as the new regime." (Ioffe, 1985: 22). These were amongst the ideas which eventually enabled Lenin to lead a one-party dictatorship. This one-party dictatorship continued during Stalin's reign, but during Stalin's regime there was a much tighter system of control, coinciding with stricter laws as dissent was met with a great deal of suppression and oppression amongst the civilians. One can argue that the old tsarist characteristics were still incorporated but in a more contemporary nature. We can reflect on this notion by referring to 'popular monarchism' and how it "perceived the Tsar as essentially good" (Overy, 2004: 106) and that despite popular monarchism eroding rapidly during the First World War, "the culture of popular adulation survived the revolution" (ibid, 106), thus transferring to the leaders Lenin and Stalin. So this notion of tsarist characteristics were still in effect in certain regards.

Nevertheless, with this political structure in place the Soviet Union managed emerge as one of the two superpowers after the Second World War, up until its eventual collapse. Much of this success can be associated with the efforts that took place during Stalin's reign. Indeed, under Stalin there was up to five Five-Year Plans that were established for the development of the Soviet economy, and the results were impressive. From the First Five-Year Plan the changes were already evident. "Nearly 1,500 major industrial concerns were constructed during this period. As a result, the Soviet Union at last acquired its own motor, aircraft, tank and tractor, machine tools, electrical, and chemical industries." (Rappaport, 1999: 91). Moreover, the Gosplan (the State Planning Commission) had seemed to "produce the statistics that everyone wanted to hear: industrial production increased annually by 12-18 percent, so that by 1933 it was proclaimed that Soviet industry had reached 281 percent of the 1913 levels under the tsar, and by 1938 this figure had shot up to 658 percent." (ibid, 91). So, it seemed the Soviet Union was making great strides to reach the levels of America in the economic, industrial and even space sectors.

Yet, despite the initial successes presented through the statistics produced by the Gosplan, "Western historians have long been sceptical about these figures, and in the late 1980s... Soviet economists revealed that these figures had been an exaggeration

and that, in fact, the Soviet rate of industrial growth during the period of the first two plans was more realistically 3.5 percent..." (ibid, 92). Moreover, the effects of the rapid industrialisation proved to have major consequences upon the civilians. Indeed, "standard of living declined during this period and wage levels were severely eroded, so that by 1932 wages for workers were at about 49 percent of their 1928 level... Stalin also set about brutally restricting the food consumption of a nation that was already living on rations." (ibid, 91). Moreover, by the 1980s the political and economic stances of the nation were in actual fact stagnating, despite figures showing that there was some sort of progress. Indeed, through the Gosnab, the State Supplies of the USSR, "the number of centrally distributed produce groups was reduced 13,000 to 618 between 1987 and 1989. A system of wholesale trade, however, did not develop, at least not at the same speed as Gosnab reduced its efforts. This led to 'a market economy without trade' as Lányi (1991) put it aptly, that is to collapse of the economy." (Hare and Davis, 1997: 56). Yet, what did emerge was a black market, which thrived in the Soviet economy for all the wrong reasons. "Most Soviet consumers came to depend on the black market, or "second economy", which expanded greatly in the 1970s." (Strayer, 1998: 57). Through this black market, corruption was indeed at large.

To enhance on our point of the lack of economic and political progress even further, we can look at the difference in income levels of the citizens. "The combination of horizontal and vertical segregation of the labor market in the Soviet Union must inevitably result in a considerable gap between average male and female incomes." (Lapidus, 1978: 190). Gail Lapidus extends on this point by giving examples of the difference in incomes in different fields. She gives an example of the monthly wage of a chief engineer, where the monthly wage differs from a chief engineer in the coal industry, ferrous metallurgy, machine-building, light industry and food industry. The earnings appear to decrease from 380 rubles for a chief engineer in the coal industry, to 270-320, 260-300, 200-210, 180-200 rubles in the other industries stated respectively. The consistency is more evident as women who predominate the "light industry, trade, communications, health and culture, communal services and housing, clerical work, medicine, and teaching-are among the most poorly paid." (ibid, 190). Indeed, this was an example of the lack of progress and disparity within such sectors of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the lack of progress was also evident in the social sector as there was low life expectancy, as well as high levels of infant mortality and amongst others, in comparison to that of the West.

Indeed, these internal factors that have been addressed played an important role in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As the internal factors have been examined, we must also address the external factors, most certainly the Cold War which was another major factor in the break-up of the system. With the conclusion of the Second World War, the United States with their capitalist ideology and on the other, the Soviet Union with their communist ideology began dominating world affairs on all fronts. Indeed, the threat of the Soviet Union was ever-growing, as their communist beliefs were influencing, or controlling, Eastern Europe. A fear of this contamination was one of the reasons behind America's act of isolating the communist countries from the economical and political spectrums of the world. The main challenge for the Soviet Union was to compete with America in the military and consequently, the economic field. Along with the United States, the Soviets took part in proxy wars which incurred heavy costs upon both nations, but more significantly upon the Soviet Union. An example is the war in Afghanistan which the Soviets ended up retreating anyway and "impacted upon Soviet society in complex ways." (Maley, 2002: 159). Moreover, "as the war and glasnost'

unveiled the past, notably the costs of the superpower status and the inability of the country to stay in the game, the war became a symbol for those arguing for a graceful and grateful withdrawal." (Galeotti, 1995: 161). Furthermore, to extend on our point on the enormous amount of costs incurred during the Cold War, it is evident that the Soviet Union struggled to keep up with the progression of the United States economically. Indeed, there were devastating results. Amongst the results, if we take a look at the GDP, gross domestic product, Leffler and Westad compared the GDP of the Soviets with the West. Their results showed that "Soviet expenditures may have been 20 percent of GDP, and probably did contribute to the difficulties of its economy." (Leffler and Westad, 2010: 64). In essence, the Soviet Union was never really able to compete with the United States despite the valiant efforts, thus, always coming second to them.

Whilst the above internal and external factors played a big role in the dissolution of the nation, it can be said that the tenure of Gorbachev during the 1980s proved to be the final nail in the Soviet Union's coffin. As with Gorbachev's predecessors, the main objective was for the need to reform. Yet, Gorbachev's intention was the attempt to revive socialism and maintain the existing structure of the Union. Nevertheless, he was not fully aware of the problems he or the state would face or even how to handle the situations effectively. In essence, Gorbachev never realised the extent of the consequences of the policies he adopted.

Amongst Gorbachev's policies, Perestroika, literally meaning restructuring, was one and was "a historic effort at restructuring the troubled Soviet economy to make it more innovative, productive and efficient." (Desai, 1989: 19). Indeed, Perestroika was an attempt to rationalise the Soviet system, rather than making wholesale changes. "Cornerstones of perestroika included the law on individual economic activity (1986), the law on state enterprise (1987) and the law on cooperatives (1988)." (Boettke, 1993: 99). However, as Boettke goes on to say, these laws did not achieve their desired results. So in essence, "from 1985 to 1991 Gorbachev introduced at least ten major policy packages for economic reform under the banner of perestroika; not a single one was implemented fully." (ibid, 99).

Another one of Gorbachev's major and infamous policies was Glasnost. Glasnost, meaning openness, was the policy of less censorship as well as the freedom of information. As Gorbachev himself had quoted, Glasnost "is an integral aspect of socialist democracy and a norm of all public life. Extensive, timely and candid information is an indication of trust in people and of respect for their intelligence, feelings and ability to comprehend various events on their own..." (McNair, 1991: 53). Yet, if we take an example in the form of the media, we can see how Glasnost had led to a negative outcome. "One result was that it progressed to a point at which Gorbachev's rivals started to take advantage of the breakdown of what had been, on the surface at least, a largely homogenous press structure. By 1988, some media outlets had begun to print openly partisan articles against Gorbachev..." (Gibbs, 1999: 9). Gibbs goes further on to explain that "glasnost proved to be hard for him to reel in while still pursuing a course different from that of his rivals... traditional controls no longer were enforced or enforceable." (ibid, 9). Thus, it was clear to see some of the consequences of both Perestroika and Glasnost. "It was glasnost, however, that ensured their defeat, for it provided people with the motivation to resist the hardline coup... Glasnost had liberated people's minds, showing them that there were alternatives to Communist Party rule, and they did not have to accept what came down from the top." (van Dijk, 2008: 365).

"Moreover, the nuclear modernisation and rearmament programme pursued by the Reagan Administration in the early 1980s, coupled with the fear of an escalation of the arms race... opened up the prospect of further, possibly unsustainable, burdens on the economy." (Webber, 1996: 23). Indeed, these internal reforms had a damning effect on the Soviets' economical stance. Furthermore, these reforms also led to the external issues in the form of the Soviet Union's satellite states and the effect on their economies as well. Gorbachev ensured he would not interfere in the domestic sphere of any of the countries, as the Cold War was entering a different and sophisticated stage. Despite this, "Gorbachev's insistence that former Soviet satellite states adopt reforms quickly led to the fall of the East European Communist regimes beginning in the autumn of 1989." (Tucker, 2011: 423). If we use the switch to hard currency as an example, we can see the reason behind the faltering nature of the regimes with regards to their economy. "The problem, however, was that none of the Comecon countries... had sufficient hard currency reserves. The switch caused the collapse of trade links within the socialist bloc. It deprived the USSR of access to Eastern European markets, compounding its economic self-isolation." (Chubarov, 2001: 177).

Indeed, we can consider Glasnost to have been the catalyst behind the eventual unravelling of the state, in the sense that its 'openness' allowed "political parties, popular movements, parliamentary oppositions, and so on, and all this was dramatically changing the political landscape." (ibid: 190). Moreover, as Chubarov states, despite the opposition to the government seemingly being modest if we consider the population of the Soviet Union, the routes taken to encourage popular movements "would have enough muscle to bring about fundamental political change." (ibid, 191). An example of movements is the nationalist movements that occurred throughout the satellite countries, for example the situations in Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, as well as the unfortunate incident in Georgia. Altercation between the soldiers and those opposed to the Communist leadership led to about twenty oppositional supporters being killed. This only added fuel to the Georgian nationalists' fire. The final straw for Gorbachev was the attempt in reviving the control of the central party-state bureaucracy, through a coup via the Conservatives in the Soviet leadership. Gorbachev was put under house arrest for not leading the coup. Nevertheless, this 'conservative putsch' was resisted, with Boris Yeltsin heading the resistance.

"On 8 December 1991, at a secret meeting in Belorussia, the leaders of the three Slavic core republics-Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia- Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk, and Stanislav Shushkevich, on their own declared the USSR dissolved..." (ibid, 193). So the Soviet Union slowly ceased to exist by the eve of its sixty-ninth anniversary. We can gather that the Soviet Union did not break-up due to a sole factor or two. But, it did so through the correlation of many as assessed in this analysis. The nation was burdened by an ideology in which they had to adhere to throughout its existence. This ideology was the catalyst behind the weak structure of the nation, as evident through the political and economical crises. Yet, we should not take away the major role the Cold War played as the Soviet Union found it extremely difficult to keep up with the might progression that was happening in the United States. Then, with the infamous tenure of Mikhail Gorbachev, his policies eventually sealed the fate of the Communist nation.

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