

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

Broadly speaking, for the most part of the twentieth century the world was divided into two ideological blocs: one of capitalism and the other of communism. The lowering of the Soviet flag from the Kremlin on 25<sup>th</sup> of December 1991, however, marked the official end of the USSR – the chief representative and guardian of the latter. It was no doubt a great event in history. So much so, that a 'New World Order' was proclaimed by some; others went further and interpreted this event as testimony to 'The End of History'. Naturally, it also raised questions: the principal being what factors led to its fall? The rapid and largely unpredicted manner in which it came to an end, rightfully, led much of the focus on the period from 1985 and Gorbachev's reign. But this period must be understood along with a broader context and framework. Indeed, a cluster of interconnected factors all to varying degrees, led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. These were both 'long' and 'short' term, as well as 'internal' and 'external' in nature.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was no doubt 'abrupt' and began with the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s. Paradoxically, however, it was also 'long in the making' since it was long term factors that played an important part in the eventual destruction of the system. From a long term perspective the collapse of the Soviet Union lay in the foundations of the project itself. The seeds of its destruction lay firstly, in its association with a redundant ideology; and secondly and closely related, with structural inherent weaknesses in the system.

The fall of the Soviet Union was not only the beginning of a revolution but it was the end of another. The revolution of 1917 was multi-faceted including various segments of society. Where mainly there was agreement was the need to modernise and catch up with the West (Chubarov, 2001: 7). In particular it was

the largely failed attempts of the Tsarist regime in the earlier period to make sufficient progress that hastened its demise. The success of the new regime depended on how this modernisation would take place. Whilst accepting certain aspects of western modernisation, modernisation under the Bolsheviks was to take an alternative route linked to an ideology.

The ideology was Marxism, based on the ideas of Karl Marx. His writings most notably the *Communist Manifesto* and *Capital* were based on observations of the European Industrialising period. Using essentially Hegelian dialectic philosophy, in fact 'turning it on its head', he made an analysis of history which he argued was scientific (Heywood, 2007: 120). This included a belief in historical materialism (the theory that material circumstances structure societal existence) and the idea that society develops based on intrinsic laws of nature. For Marx, the internal contradictions of capitalism (such as its exploitation of workers) would draw it to an end. A transitional phase between the collapse of capitalism and the eventual establishment of a communist society would be marked by the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'; after which a new humane and perfect order based on total equality and common ownership which would bring an end to the state and the class system.

This all-inclusive and comprehensive system of thought that explained practically everything from politics to society through the lens of the economic foundations, and which mixed in with older beliefs of Russia's uniqueness as a harmonious Slavic people, promised a 'higher' form of human organisation (Strayer, 1998:30). Contrary to some western observations, such as Richard Pipes (1990) who ignores the role and grievances of the masses (see Lowe, 2002: 108-114), the Bolsheviks and Marxism were at first met with general acceptance and popular support.

However, the problem from the outset was these philosophical ideas were based on a utopian vision based on an idealistic human nature, which in reality has never existed nor could it (see Chubarov, 2001:45-49). Moreover, Marx's

theories were full of ambiguities and inaccuracies (between his earlier and later works), for example, he failed to conclusively articulate how the state was to 'wither away', and his predictions of the socialist revolution in the developed West proved wrong. Similarly, he failed to understand how capitalism would eventually be a means of meeting the demands from below, such as welfare, education and universal suffrage. Furthermore, the teleological nature of the ideology created a rigid system based on the dead weight of 'dogma'—unlike the resilience of western capitalism. Yet within this narrow framework, the space between the ambiguities and the unattainable utopian aspirations meant there was enough room for interpretation and revision; but the contradictions between the two meant the Communist Party would have to rely on a hybrid of 'ideological illusion and raw coercion' (Strayer, 1998: 36).

The political and economic structure of the Soviet Union was to be shaped in her early years by both Lenin and later Stalin. It was to change very little until the mid-1980s. From the start a highly centralized and bureaucratized order emerged which directed a strict command economy. Contrary to Lenin's earlier democratic commitment (Walker, 1993:22), his notion of 'democratic centralism' and the need for a 'vanguard party' meant that a one-party dictatorship was created. Power shifted from all institutions, such as trade unions and the soviets to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. A tight system of censorship and state control was imposed on most aspects of life (Smith, 2005: 9) and dissent was met with suppression; particularly harsh under Stalin. This was also true of the areas outside Russia proper. Again, an earlier commitment to a 'global revolution' was later abrogated by Stalin. Instead in the pre-1945 years the fifteen republics were consolidated within the Union; and in the post-World War Two years Moscow imposed communist regimes on her western borders creating a 'buffer zone', including Eastern Germany.

From the start therefore, far from the idealistic blueprints and propaganda of the Party, what had emerged was a pseudo-humanistic regime with

characteristics of older tsarist autocracy garbed in a modern form. Nevertheless, within this political configuration the Soviet Union emerged as one of the two great powers of the twentieth century, and remained so until her end. Much of the groundwork for this was laid under Stalin. A series of five-year plans achieved overall remarkable results. By the 1930s the economy according to *Gosplan* was growing at 13.9 per cent and unemployment virtually disappeared as development was brought into previously completely rural areas (Crouch, 1989: 26). Industrial capacity in all major fields including steel, coal and electric power helped create new sectors and branches of industry (Chubarov, 2001: 103-104). Results were spectacular in the military sphere and by the 1950s had overtaken the United States with her hydrogen bomb (ibid: 130). By the 1960s a country that had previously been seen as backward and agrarian had rapidly industrialised. For example, adult literacy increased to 98 per cent (Stoner-Weiss, 2009: 4); economic and industrial growth had been continuous; and the USSR was even competing with the United States in space exploration.

However, the apparent earlier successes in the Soviet Union were limited and were mainly only in the military-industrial complex to the expense of other sectors and both the peasantry and the urban population. For example, the forced collectivisation of agriculture not only resulted in enormous loss of life, but it achieved nothing and by the 1960s the USSR was importing grain. This was ironic considering the size of the country. Similarly, during this period wages only doubled while prices tripled, taxes were increased, and living and working conditions did not improve; at times many staple foods were rationed (Crouch, 1989: 26-27). This was in contrast to the West's socio-economic, scientific and technological revolution. Seeing this as a threat from early on Soviet leaders sought to close their people from the 'West's temptations' (Chubarov, 2001:132).

By the 1980s the political system faced a number of chronic problems which played a vital role in her demise. In the economy whilst official figures were still showing modest growth, in reality it was in stagnation. The problem was with the

absence of a market economy; hence natural supply and demand forces, low priority for the production of consumer goods and worker rewards meant there was no incentive for workers to work hard and productivity dropped. 'We pretend to work, while you pretend to pay us' was a common motto of the day. In a sense the basis of the 'socialist contract' where the state was to provide employment and services was failing (Stoner-Weiss, 2009: 45). The immediate need to meet planned-state targets meant figures were not only fabricated, but little attention was paid to investment in technology, machinery and a skilled labour force. Nor was there any attention paid to the environmental toll as laws on air pollution were routinely violated resulting in disease and a lack of useable natural resources (Ziegler, 1999:146). This was mainly due to the fact that the CPSU was so closely connected to the whole process. Workers, managers and members of the Party became secure in their positions as long as they 'did not step out of line' (Smith, 2005:14). Alongside the formal economy a black market engulfed 25 per cent of economic activity. A culture of deception, corruption, low discipline and complacency marred the whole inflexible system.

The impact of the lack of economic and political progress was profound on society at large. It was true that in many ways the living and working conditions of Soviet citizens improved in certain spheres. However, there were growing disparities in income levels and beneath the surface there were many problems. Even those content believed the system was rigid, lacked initiative, and failed to protect freedoms (Laver, 1997: 25). Furthermore, in comparison to the western OECD countries the standard of living was far behind. This was especially true in areas like education, housing and other welfare services (Stoner-Weiss, 2009: 6). The same was true in other social areas such as low life expectance, high infant mortality, alcoholism, and the unequal status of women in comparison to the West. Indeed the communist blocs (i.e. Eastern Europe and the USSR) economic weakness confirmed Marxism's fundamental tenet -- the fortune of society is linked to its economic base (Okey, 2004: 38).

In good times the political order may certainly have been tolerated, but in an era of reasonably educated citizens the one-party system (which also dictated the economic imperatives) was failing to meet the complex demands of society (Bowker and Ross, 2000: 2). In addition to those groups who were connected to the system other groups in society began to emerge, such as professional and intellectuals seeking more cultural autonomy. Many of these groups played a part working with the state and used their special position to bring new ideas and a different world view of the outside world (Chubarov, 2001: 156-58). In a way a type of pluralistic social structure was evolving. Alongside this, there was also a limited but growing dissent both within the Russian Republic as well as in the other parts of the Union and Eastern Europe; although where it threatened the existing order it was crushed.

These 'internal' factors which played a part in the fall of the Soviet Union must also be seen within the context of the 'external factors' such as the Cold War, which was a principal element in the causes of the fall of the system. The Cold War had its origins in the beginnings of the communist state when the West and especially the US began funding the Whites. Antagonism grew in the post-World War Two era as the two 'opposing world views' came into collision on 'all fronts' continually until the end. From the start the United States followed a policy which sought to isolate the communist world from the rest politically and economically; although at times it played one against the other, for example China against Russia as the world communist movement became divided. The main challenges for the Soviets were military and as a consequence economic. Militarily, the Soviets became (like the US) involved in a number of proxy and surrogate costly wars; for example in Afghanistan, where she would eventually retreat.

Moreover, the embodiment of the Cold War was an intense arms race, as both sides spent incredible amounts of monies. However, it was economically devastating for the USSR as her spending on defence rose to more than 15 per

cent of her GDP. Half the amount her adversary spent (Bowker and Ross, 2000:3). This restricted improvements in other fields and also consequently triggered debt, especially following a fall in oil prices between 1982 and 1985. Hostilities had taken a new turn with the presidency of Reagan – an ardent ideologue. In particular, his SDI initiative helped drain Soviet resources (Stoner-Weiss, 2009: 17-18). In reality, the USSR was always an incomplete superpower and always second to the United States.

Successive Soviet leaders had periodically sought to make changes as they saw the system was failing: from Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation and partial liberalisation, Brezhnev's re-codification of the ideological basis of communism in the form of 'mature socialism', as he saw no signs of a communist reality approaching, through to Chernenko's anti-corruption campaigns. On the whole reforms were largely unsuccessful. This was because they were modest. The higher echelons of the Party realized any radical reforms would threaten the 'key pillars of the system' (Gregory, 2008: 52); and hence their positions.

While the above factors played a part in the fall of the Soviet Union, in a sense the 'fuel', the system by the mid-1980s was not about to collapse. As Brown points out 'many an inefficient state has been able to muddle thorough or muddle down over the decades' (Brown, 2009: 17). Indeed, it was Gorbachev's revolution from within that was to provide the 'spark'.

On coming to power Gorbachev, like most others in society including many within the Party and state-bureaucracy, was aware of the need for reform. He was not however, a liberal democrat. But, rather naively, he intended to rejuvenate socialism and maintain the existing framework of the USSR. Yet from the beginning he had no fully comprehensive idea of the problems facing the state or how he would reverse them. Instead, he followed a gradual and at times reactionary path to change. In the process he failed to foresee the consequences of his policies.

Perestroika, the restructuring of the economy, party and society, was Gorbachev's response. Although it was an ambiguous term, at first it was mainly related only to be economy. As Gorbachev stated '[the economy was] was the key to our problems' (cited from Strayer, 1998: 95). It was coupled with the slogan 'acceleration' (uskorenie), but in the beginning it was about rationalising the existing system, rather than making any fundamental changes. A number of reforms were initiated such as anti-corruption attempts, investments in machine-building, the electrical engineering sector and a Five-Year Plan was put in force in order to achieve higher growth targets. In the agricultural sphere a large ministry (Gosagroprom) was created replacing smaller ones (Lowe, 2002: 405). In social policy a campaign against alcoholism and drunkenness was launched. Gorbachev strongly linked alcoholism to the economy, which he blamed for poor work-discipline, and other social problems (Marples, 2004:27). These early steps, however, proved erroneous and had a negative as opposed to a positive outcome. For example, Gosagroprom developed into another bureaucracy, larger and more difficult to control; similarly, the anti-alcohol initiative led to a closure of vineyards, a loss of revenue – which meant additions to the black-market and a financial deficit, and it also proved unpopular.

Thereafter, Gorbachev's 'New Thinking' turned more radical and included more severe economic and political reforms, including democratisation. He blamed the shortcomings not on his policies, but on conservative elements within the party officials (Chubarov, 2001:179). Gorbachev now believed that the whole system had to restructure on entirely new principles. Already earlier he had spoken of Glasnost (open or frankness), but the investigation into Chernobyl had proven it was only limited. However, now, it was to change as greater public debate and much freedom of expression gained momentum. Previously political and social underground movements began to emerge. Gorbachev even allowed Soviet History and past tyrannies into the realm of glasnost (Walker, 1993: 80). This 'socialist pluralism' was the equivalent to a social awakening and the rebirth of

civil society. The result was that Gorbachev's reforms became intertwined with this 'new spirit' – one which was increasingly becoming radical.

Again a number of reforms were initiated in the economic sphere, but with the possible exception of the co-operatives, which had some success, most of the policies were a complete failure. For example, joint ventures were allowed in order to bring in investment. The problem was because they were operating outside of the central planning they were 'starved of materials allocated by the central agencies' (Smith, 2005:41). Similarly, the Law of Enterprises was unleashed with the intention of bringing in initiative from enterprise managers, which in theory was to inject competition into the economy. The problem was, managers instead of improving quality, production and looking for others to work with in the Union; they raised the prices and turned to the local-party for help. They became a burden on local government. Other plans sought to cut of the party in its interference of economic management and the size of ministries was cut; the problem was the party and its bureaucracy was the 'blood vessels' of the entire command structure. Indeed by 1990 the economy had been in rapid decline and in a far worse position than 1985; government borrowing and quantitative easing was out of control. A last minute attempt to revitalise the system, with the '500 Days Programme' was met with chaos.

The reason for this was the economic crisis was entangled with political reforms. Gorbachev believed there was no contradiction between the principles of communism and democracy. On the contrary he argued it was its true essence. He criticized the policy of his predecessors of leaving party officials in posts for long periods. The Nineteenth Party Conference was characterized by these debates, and moves were made away from authoritarianism – albeit within the one-party system; although now it was only to guide. By the end of 1988 the old Supreme Soviet was replaced by a three chamber Congress of People's Deputies; two of which were to be elected and the other had a large proportion of reserved seats. However, the subsequent elections in 1989 led to the defeat of many

communists (although the system was still in their favour) and a popular revolution against the regime. Indeed the election campaigns had helped create new forms of political action, such as rallies and speeches calling for reforms beyond controlled liberalization. These were given added fervour as the new USSR Congress encountered televised parliamentary politics (Chubarov, 2001: 182-3). By 1990, with economic turmoil, social awakening had reached a breaking point. Other forms of discontent such as large-scale strikes emerged led by independent working classes throughout the various sectors.

Internal reform also triggered 'external' transformation in both Eastern Europe and the Republics of the USSR – the very heart and make-up of the polity. On coming to power Gorbachev signalled that he would not interfere in the domestic affairs of the satellite. This was particularly significant as the Cold War tensions were entering a new episode. Gorbachev had realised the cost of the burden and overstretch of the USSR, and sought a permanent détente to the surprise of many in the US. In reality it was probably a ploy in order to focus on the rejuvenation of the Soviet Union. But this situation, coupled with an atmosphere of tolerance, and the defunct economic and trading order in the Comecon countries – especially following Gorbachev's switch to hard currency, which in theory was to make the Eastern European bloc further dependent on the USSR, but had the opposite effect (ibid: 177) – meant the Soviet Union could have no quarrels with a Europe that went its own way. This it did as revolutions (mainly bloodless) brought down regime after regime as Gorbachev stood watching.

These external events became a nucleus for nationalist sentiments which had been emerging since the mid-1980s. Indeed the period of glasnost had a greater effect on the Republics. Firstly, it provoked violence between some ethnic divisions; for example, between the Osetins and the Abkhaz in Georgia and the Armenians and Azerbaijan over boarder disputes. Secondly, the Republics began to witness independence movements from within each with its own grievances.

Some of these Republics, such as the Baltic States had never recognised the legality of their incorporation into the Union; others had been the victims of severe suppression. Whilst Gorbachev proved he was willing to use force, for example against the Azerbaijan National Front, he also forced through the Law of Secession, which in principle meant republics could break away (Lowe, 2002). Ironically, and most importantly, there also emerged a Russian independence strand led by Yeltsin.

One consequence of Gorbachev's political reforms had been the splits between disciples of Perestroika and within the Party. Throughout this period strands of conservatives and liberals were in an intense struggle. As time passed and as the socio-political situation deteriorated trust in Gorbachev was dwindling. The radicals saw his reforms as cosmetic whilst the conservatives foresaw the collapse of the entire system. Human agency, in particular Yeltsin, a radical, played a major role in the end of the Soviet political system. Yeltsin had been previously ousted from the Party. However he returned with populist support and by 1990 had established an alternative base to the CPSU, in the Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR, as he championed the democratic and independence cause. Thus a chaotic system reminiscent of the 1917 Revolution created a 'dual' political order. Eventually, Gorbachev began moving to the right, but by now the traditional power bases of the CPSU could not challenge the tide of independence as local legislatures gained virtual control. A final putsch by the conservatives in August 1991, and an attempt by Gorbachev to re-create an alternative Union failed. By the end of the year Yeltsin had unanimously agreed the terms of the dissolution of the Soviet Union with the other main players.

Therefore, the fall of the USSR was not due to a single, nor to a few factors. Instead it was due to a cluster of interconnected factors, all of which to varying degrees contributed. From a long term perspective the project was fraught with a redundant ideology which promised a utopian future but was based on false pretence. A link was forged between this ideology and the organisation of

governance. This naturally created a weak structure because the justification for the whole project was based on a link between power and an ideological imperative. However, the system did not collapse because of its inherent weaknesses alone; if this was so many political systems in the world today would collapse, including communist regimes, for example in China. These factors were added with the burdens of a Cold War throughout its existence. But more important was the coming to power of Gorbachev who broke the link between the communist system and its ideological imperative in its 'entirety'. He believed Soviet communism was compatible with all the tenets of liberal democracy and capitalism. The reality was from the start it was the antitheses of it: the two were based on different principles. If for example, he had only changed the economic aspects of communism, like the Chinese, the USSR may have survived. Instead, the more he tried to liberalise the whole system, the more other factors were arising, such as an economic crisis, social unrest, old questions of the nationalities and political opponents – all of which would bring an end to the regime.

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