

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

The break up and dissolution of the Soviet Union on the 25th December 1991 heralded the end of the Cold War. It ushered in what had been termed 'the new world order', furthermore, it was suggested by Francis Fukuyama to have signalled the end of history and the battle of ideas which had dominated much of the twentieth century (Huntington, 1996; 31). The 'clash of civilizations' had already seen the demise of fascism as a credible force in 1945, the close of 1991 would see the end of communism in Europe. The relatively sudden collapse of the USSR has compelled thinkers and analysts to seek answers as to why the world's second superpower could collapse so quickly and so utterly. Can it be attributed to one single catastrophic event, or is it far more appropriate to place blame on a number of contributing factors? The controversy surrounding the collapse of the USSR has been compared to the collapse of the Roman Empire among others and will also continue to be interpreted and reinterpreted for many years to come (Laqueur 1993; 387). This essay will look at some of the factors which lead to dissolution and assess the importance of each.

The key issues that this essay will assess include the problem of the nationalities, the Gorbachev factor, economic problems, and the social and political upheavals caused by Perestroika and Glasnost. The Gorbachev factor must be viewed in the context of state of the country he inherited from his predecessors coupled with the effects of Glasnost and Perestroika. It has been suggested that Glasnost and Perestroika played key roles in hastening the collapse of the world's second superpower. Glasnost (meaning openness) allowed people to see the flaws in the system and questions were raised as to whether or not communism had been good for Russia. Perestroika (meaning restructuring) also highlighted flaws in the political and bureaucratic system that could not be given a quick fix. The economic problems of the USSR have also been cited as a considerable factor in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The command economy had stifled innovation and its existence outside of the world economy had caused major problems. Further to this the USSR could not keep up with the military spending of the USA during the 1980s. Competing against the military spending of the Reagan Administration as well as fighting a protracted war against the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan had all but exhausted the economy of the USSR.

The nationalities provided a great problem for any ideas of national unity. It has been argued by Lord William Wallace that it would be very difficult for the European Union evolve into a unified state because there is a lack of identity and little sense of shared history across the continent (Smith, 2005). This is the same problem facing attempts by Soviet leaders to foster a single Soviet nationality. The very same issue had been faced by the Tsarist system before it. One of the few things the nationalities had in common was the centuries of Russian domination.

Sitting on what 75 years before had been the Tsarist Russian Empire, the Soviet Union faced same problem as had the Tsarist regime, namely the incredibly diverse ethnic make-up of the territory. The Russian SFSR, itself one of 15 constituent republics of the USSR, was made up of many smaller semi-autonomous republics. Russians formed the biggest ethnic group at just over 50%, followed by the Ukrainians with 15% of the total population. Other nationalities included Uzbek; Byelorussians; Kazakh and Volga Tatar among many others. The downfall of the Soviet Union gave an opportunity for peoples across the vast territory from Kamchatka to the Kola Peninsula to clamour for recognition (Dukes, 1998; 332). This suggests that the problem of the nationalities would continue to

be a headache for the newly formed Russian Federation. The rise of nationalism added to the troubles faced by the Kremlin during the 1980s. The growth of the Transcaucasia and Baltic Popular Fronts had brought the problem of the nationalities to the fore when in 1989 the Red Army entered Tbilisi to assist the Georgian authorities in putting down a rally. Soviet troops were also used to prop up the communist government of Azerbaijan under threat from nationalist forces (Chubarov, 2001; 195). The Baltic States did not join the chorus of statements of sovereignty which had come from Kazakhstan and Ukraine, this was because they regarded their incorporation into the USSR as an illegal act. They challenged the legality of the Molotov - Ribbentrop pact of 1939 and achieved international support in the form of the American refusal to recognise the annexation of the region (Strayer, 1998; 152-153). The policy of Perestroika can be seen as the catalyst for the increase in nationalism as the planned restructuring of the USSR exposed fundamental flaws in the Soviet system. The policy of Glasnost also exposed corruption within the Caucasian and Central Asian republics, Gorbachev responded by replacing the Kazakh Communist Party leader Kunaev with a Russian. This caused a great deal of rioting in Almaty (Strayer, 1998; 150-151). Further to the rise of popular front movements within the constituent republics, the Soviet Union was also facing a crisis with its East European satellites due in part to the policies of Glasnost and Perestroika.

Glasnost and Perestroika are often cited as the most important factors in speeding the demise of the Soviet Union. Eric Hobsbawm claims that the only thing that made the soviet system work was the command structure of the party and the state which had been inherited from the days of Stalin (1995; 480). Once again it seemed that reform from the top was going to introduce fundamental change which was to be ultimately uncontrollable. Hobsbawm also suggests that 'glasnost amounted to the disintegration of authority' and 'perestroika amounted to the destruction of the old mechanisms which made the economy work' (1995; 483). Perestroika had to an extent legalised dissent, and groups in cities across the USSR began forming larger political groups known as 'clubs of socially active citizens' (Chubarov, 2001; 190). This radical departure from the Soviet norm of suppressing membership of political parties other than the Communist Party was facilitated by the decision to stop arrests on the grounds of political activity. The release of political prisoners saw the growth of new organisations outside of the Soviet system, however by 1988 this opposition numbered just a few thousand (Chubarov, 2001; 191). Glasnost played a major part in the unravelling of the Soviet Union. It brought forward into stark light the myriad of social problems which had previously been dismissed as either false or at least peripheral (Acton, 1995; 320-321). Part of glasnost and perestroika involved the relaxing of censorship of the press and other media. It was clear to Gorbachev that hard line censorship was a futile exercise given the increasing public access to western broadcasts, particularly in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 (Acton, 1995; 320). It was recognised that reform of the economy and wider society could not happen under the current level of state censorship. Not even Lenin escaped criticism under glasnost, it was claimed that the October revolution had been an unmitigated disaster for Russia, leading the nation on a long road to nowhere (Acton, 1995; 323). Gorbachev and his policies of glasnost and perestroika soon faced serious problems with regards to implementation of the reforms. It seemed that Gorbachev was trying to do the impossible by marrying completely opposing concepts, 'socialism with capitalism, totalitarianism with democracy'(Chubarov, 2001; 194). This was also known as the Gorbachev Factor.

The Gorbachev Factor stems from the problem of the Soviet Union being too reliant on the top figure in government (Chubarov, 2001; 194). it was almost impossible to override the powers held by Gorbachev, even if it did mean following his lead to the destruction of the USSR. It can be argued that this same problem led to economic stagnation under Brezhnev and the less than successful schemes of Khrushchev. Regional fragmentation and the erosion of the USSR as a 'political and economic empire' pushed the republics further towards secession, the communist parties in the Baltic States split from the main communist party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). This caused a wave of similar actions in other constituent republics and served to hasten the disintegration of the country. The

process of democratisation initiated by Gorbachev set the Soviet Union on the course to oblivion for it allowed the republics to elect popular governments and vote to secede from the union via referendum. This most significant of these was the referendum held by Ukraine the results of which indicated the will of the people to leave the union. However this is at odds with the referendum set down by Gorbachev regarding the retention and reform of the USSR, which received overwhelming popular support. Nevertheless the simple fact that the largest republic in the USSR other than Russia had voted to leave the union could only have a catastrophic effect on the future of the country as a whole. Gorbachev had no choice but to accept these events, as there could be no return to Stalinist era of brutal suppression such as that seen during the Hungarian Uprising in 1956.

Gorbachev faced opposition to the introduction of restructuring and openness to the soviet system. The opposition came to a head in August of 1991, the central state bureaucracy made an attempt at regaining political control of the country (Chubarov, 2001; 193). A coup d'état was launched in an attempt to reassert conservative values to the Soviet system. Gorbachev was put under house arrest in Crimea while attempts were made at reversing the damage done by perestroika. This however received no popular support from the public, prompting Boris Yeltsin to act to put a stop to the coup. Yeltsin, President of the Russian SFSR led a three day resistance movement which involved barricades being set up in central Moscow and around the 'White House' to prevent the plotters from assuming power (Chubarov, 2001; 193). This proved to be one of the final acts which led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. With Gorbachev's power almost completely eroded, a secret meeting of the leaders of the three main Slavic states declared that the USSR officially ceased to exist. Without a country to lead Gorbachev tendered his resignation on 25th December 1991. All but five signatures were present on the declaration of the end of the USSR. The Baltic states had long maintained their annexation was illegal, Georgia would sign later. The other noticeable absence was that of Mikhail Gorbachev (Chubarov, 2001; 194-195).

This essay has given an assessment of the events leading to the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Although it cannot be said with any great certainty that any one factor was more influential than another, it must be noted that Glasnost and Perestroika have not been too far away from any of the issues discussed here. The two flagship policies of Gorbachev had been intended to complement each other, in reality they had the opposite effect. Attempting to join opposing concepts was a futile exercise which no doubt hastened the demise of the Soviet superpower. The problems faced by the Soviet government ran much deeper than appeared to the Soviet public. Years of economic stagnation and bureaucratic strangulation had left the Soviet Union a spent force by the late 1980s. Robert Strayer suggests that 'tinkering with its fragile structures would send it [the USSR] spinning into oblivion' (1998; 88). One can't avoid this harrowing assessment being very similar to the assertion made by Adolf Hitler shortly before launching Operation Barbarossa, that 'one has only to kick in the door, and the whole rotten edifice will come crashing down'. Of course this was a statement of propaganda and should be viewed with that in mind. Ultimately the Soviet Union was broken by a series of intertwining events, both long term and short term, some more important than others but each playing a crucial role. Just as the USSR was established on the ruins of the Tsarist Empire, the newly formed Russian Federation is established on the ruins of the USSR, marked by the raising of the Russian Tricolour, watched by a small group of pro-communist supporters.

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