

## **Assess the Main Factors Leading to the Break-up of the Soviet Union**

It has been observed in the past that, at the time of Mikhail Gorbachëv's ascension to power following the death of his predecessor Konstantin Chernenko in 1985, few people believed that the Soviet Union was heading for collapse; merely reform (Bartlett, R. (2005:278)). Thus the question begs; what changed over the next five years to bring one of the world's two superpowers to the point of utter disintegration and demise? Doubtless there are many factors involved. For instance, the Soviet Union's ongoing competition with the west, most notably the United States, placed a massive financial burden on an economy which was quickly becoming outdated. Indeed, the impact of Cold War relations upon the economy extended further than simply the financial burden which the maintenance of massive conventional and nuclear forces entailed. Particularly since the election to the US Presidency of Ronald Reagan, the USSR had found itself increasingly isolated, its economy being deprived of rapidly advancing western technology which it struggled to replicate either domestically or within its 'Outer Empire' of satellite states. Moving away from Cold War concerns, there is the impact of Gorbachëv's reforms and the question of whether or not any reform could have been performed within the Soviet Union, as it was at the time, without risking its destruction. Certainly there were significant flaws within the Soviet model, and Gorbachëv realised this, hence his reforming zeal, but there remains some doubt whether these flaws could possibly be addressed at all, or whether the system had become so 'self-sustaining' and indeed 'self-dependent', that any attempt to change it would be ultimately fatal. Many of the issues relating to the wisdom of Gorbachëv's reforms concern the state of the Soviet Union's political and economic systems and how they related to each other. Furthermore, the creation, or permitting to exist, of a meaningful political opposition to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) represents possibly one of the most dangerous developments which were seen under Gorbachëv. When taken in combination, these factors, and some more beside, would bring an end to the USSR, the task here is to assess the impact of each and determine their respective relevance to the break-up of the Soviet Union.

It is important to make clear that Gorbachëv, was an utterly committed CPSU member and a dedicated socialist: he never intended to destroy the Marxist-Leninist system. Rather, it was his fervent belief in the Soviet system which provided him the courage to take the risks inherent in his reform programme (Acton, E. (1986:311)). Gorbachëv, and indeed many others, saw reform as desperately necessary in light of the significant problems facing the USSR at the time; problems such as the spiralling cost of the Cold War arms race, the growing disparity in living standards between the USSR and the west and the ongoing burden of the war in Afghanistan. Such problems were exacerbated by the declining health of the Soviet economy. For years the Soviet Union had relied upon its system of a centralised 'state planned' economy, and in the past this had served them well, such as in World War II (or 'Great Patriotic War'). However, it had considerable weaknesses which were exposed over time. For instance, a planned economy chronically stifles innovation and competition, while the socialist element removes individual incentive and can harm motivation. These shortcomings contributed

in turn to further ills, such as the under-production of consumer goods and the commensurate impact on living standards. More significantly in the military-industrial sphere, the lack of innovation and competitiveness led to Soviet technology falling woefully behind that of the west, as was demonstrated by the USSR's failure to meet the challenge of SDI. As Edward Acton puts it in his '*Russia: The Tsarist and Soviet Legacy*' (1986);

"Military leaders were painfully aware that an economy in which computers had barely appeared at all could not long compete with the laser beams of the west." (Acton, E. (1986:309)).

Gorbachëv and much of the Soviet Union's leadership reached the same conclusions. In order to address the defence aspects of the economic shortfall, Gorbachëv embarked on a programme of reducing Cold War tensions, the theory being that if the Soviet Union appeared to pose less of a threat it would face less hostility. Such a situation would make fewer demands upon the military and would thus make available greater state funds for social and economic matters. To this end Gorbachëv announced a number of unilateral anti-nuclear moves and engaged the United States in a number of arms control talks and summits as well as orchestrating the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan (Acton, E. (2005:313)). However, while these developments did reduce the strain on the military, the savings would prove insufficient to address the burgeoning balance of payments deficit being accumulated by the government.

Gorbachëv accepted, therefore, the need for economic reform, and the political reform which must necessarily accompany it. He also accepted that such reform would be painful, but remained convinced that the system and CPSU's position could be maintained (Acton, E. (1986:312)). Indeed, his early reforms met with significant public support, key-words of *glasnost* (openness), *perestroika* (restructuring), *uskorenie* (acceleration) and *demokratizatsiia* (democratisation) were all so loosely defined that anyone could find at least something positive in them. Somewhat amusingly, the rigid party discipline that Gorbachëv sought to combat by his reforms prevented those in the party who rejected his ideas from voicing their opposition (Acton, E. (1986:312)). Indeed, there were considerable positive reasons to support Gorbachëv's plans. For instance, 'white collar' workers anticipated gaining greater professional and artistic freedoms. Granted, amongst the 'working classes' there was a not unreasonable degree of suspicion regarding the drives against slack work discipline and for intensifying labour, but there remained a substantial degree of support for what Acton called;

"an assault upon the restrictions and frustrations of Soviet life." (Acton, E. (1986:312)).

Indeed, Gorbachëv initially enjoyed the support of the kind of 'upper echelon' personnel, such as members of the Central Committee, top bureaucrats and KGB and military leaders who one might think would naturally oppose change (Bartlett, R. (2005:278)). Perhaps it is just this conspicuously high-level support which serves as the most useful indicator of the intentions of Gorbachëv's reforms: such privileged individuals would of course not seek the destruction of a system which served their interests so keenly, but they would be the best placed to perceive the severity of its ailments and would have the greatest interests in resolving such ills while maintaining the system in principle. However, Gorbachëv critically misjudged the strength of anxiety and anti-Unionist feeling within the USSR, his attempts to rejuvenate society by greater (albeit guarded) openness would eventually conspire against him and the system he wished to protect.

This, coupled to Gorbachëv's own personal refusal to resort to violent coercion created a situation where vastly underestimated anti-Union forces could be unleashed, but no longer combated or contained.

The initial stages of Gorbachëv's political '*perestroika*' reforms were characterised by the importance of '*glasnost*'. This stemmed from the perception that one of the primary ills of the Soviet system was a considerable degree of corruption and personal power-hoarding undermining the efficiency of the system. Glasnost was intended to combat this but, rather unsurprisingly, met with little enthusiasm amongst the privileged nomenklatura that benefitted from the system as it then was. Gorbachëv resorted to a method of mobilising mass support against those elites who opposed his reforms; such actions also satisfied his democratising goals in the process. The example used by Bartlett of the ills of the system and the way in which they had hitherto been addressed came with the meltdown in April 1986 of reactor no. 4 at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine. In Roger Bartlett's '*A History of Russia*' (2005), he quotes Gorbachëv on the subject;

"Everything that had built up over the years converged in this drama: the concealing or hushing up of accidents and other bad news, irresponsibility and carelessness, slipshod work, wholesale drunkenness." (Bartlett, R. (2005:280)).

In the aftermath of the disaster Glasnost was "pushed wider" as Gorbachëv rapidly expanded its scope. Beginning within the CPSU itself, Gorbachëv introduced competitive, multi-candidate elections for Party and then public posts. More significantly, this democratising impetus was carried further with the creation of the 'All-Union Congress of People's Deputies' (CPD) at the Nineteenth Party Congress in 1988 (Bartlett, R. (2005:280)). The CPD would be largely elected by popular vote and the election would be considerably freer than the elections of the past. The significance of this move was that it could potentially create a political opposition to the government enjoying the moral authority mass of public support, something the government and CPSU itself arguably lacked. However, the elections to the first CPD returned only a minority of 'reformist' deputies (some 400 out of 2250). Gorbachëv himself occupied one of the 100 seats in the CPD reserved for the CPSU and thus had no democratic mandate, unlike those leaders of the 'radical bloc', such as Boris Yeltsin and Andrei Sakharov, who did (Bartlett, R. (2005:280)).

The All-Union CPD would prove to be hugely important. For instance, between May 1989 and March 1990 it first passed legislation designed to turn the Soviet Union into a 'law based' state and later, following a proposal by the Central Committee, to amend the Constitution and remove the previously enshrined primacy of the Party. Furthermore, it soon passed legislation introducing full freedom of speech and election and devolved considerable powers to regional levels (Bartlett, R. (2005:281)). Thus in the period of a little over two years the Soviet Union had gone from a repressive, one-party state with rigged elections and little personal freedom, to ostensibly a democratic, multi-party state. At the same time, the CPD created the new position of 'President of the Soviet Union', a position which was quickly filled by Gorbachëv who took the role via secret CPD ballot, not by popular vote (Bartlett, R. (2005:282)). Such arbitrariness, and the absence of any democratic mandate would come to undermine his authority in the face of the democratically elected officials in other parts of the increasingly convoluted Soviet political system that his reforms had helped to create. Indeed, such conflict was only becoming more likely as another outcome of his reforms. Significantly, although at this

time held by a member of the CPSU, the office of President theoretically created a separate power structure outside of the CPSU. This, along with newly granted freedoms of speech and election, and the declining influence and importance of the Party, were beginning to fundamentally undermine Soviet society's foundations; that the Party devolved its justification for rule by its being the guardian of an ideology to which every citizen was party, albeit not always by choice. As a result of the reforms people were free to divert from the Union's ideology and free also to vote for politicians whose interests lay somewhere other than with the CPSU and the Soviet Union as a whole and single entity. Indeed, individuals did not have to hold a particular aversion to socialism as an ideology in order to have no love for the USSR and All-Union administration, represented as it was by the CPSU. Rather, the issue of individual republic autonomy, perhaps even independence, was to become a factor in encouraging the break-up of the Union as opposed to any outright rejection of every element of its ideology. This is not to say that nationalism was the prime factor in the USSR's demise, but as the All-Union administration began to fail and demonstrated little potential ability to rectify the problems besetting society, it would be only natural for people to look for alternative arrangements.

One useful representation of the ways in which the Soviet Union was failing its citizens is the state of the economy. As already mentioned, the Soviet economy was, by the late 1980s, stagnating and was about to begin a sharp decline. Some of the fundamental problems of a socialist planned economy have already been addressed with particular reference to military affairs but the same principles can be applied to other aspects of economic activity. For example, Soviet living standards, so often referenced regarding this question, having risen considerably during the first half of the Soviet era (the impact of WWII notwithstanding) had risen more slowly in the second half. Part of the reason for this is that the Soviet economy was far too agriculture and heavy industry orientated (Chubarov, A. (2011)). Such economic interests are representative of an earlier global economic era which the west was rapidly leaving behind but in which the Soviet Union still found itself mired. Thus, while western economies were producing television sets and household electrical goods, Soviet industry was more able to produce tractors. To combat this dearth of consumer goods and to rejuvenate the economy, Gorbachëv passed a series of laws, such as the 'Law on Independent Labour Activity' (1986), and the 'Law on Co-operatives' (1988) (Walker, R. (1993:81)). Together, these laws made legal private earnings as well as the creation of companies outside of state ownership, thus it was hoped that these laws would help improve Soviet living standards by making available the sorts of consumer goods demanded by the populace yet 'underproduced' by the central planning agencies by creating a 'market responsive' element of the economy. A further law, the 'Law on State Enterprise' (1987) sought to improve productivity within the existing state sector by granting greater autonomy to individual plants, allowing them to use a certain amount of their productive capacity, after meeting state quotas, to respond to market demand. It also made provisions for workers to participate in the election of their plant's management, the intention here being to encourage a sense of 'ownership' of and 'belonging' to one's plant and thus encourage greater activity among the work force (Walker, R. (1993:81)). In practice this failed to materialise, plants often had so negligible surplus capacity as a result of the *uskorenïe* drive they had virtually no remaining capacity with which to attempt to fill either domestic or foreign private contracts. Regarding employee election of management, those most likely to win the support of the workers were those who promised wage increases, thus placing a greater burden on plant finances and contributing to creeping inflation (Acton, E. (1986:318).

The effect of the laws creating a private sector was less than hoped for. New enterprises were forced to operate within markets already dominated, on some cases practically monopolised by state companies and thus found it very hard to become established. Furthermore, these private firms still relied on state financial and supply organisations as well as facing competition from established state companies operating within their markets. Some such state firms enjoyed near monopolies of their sectors and thus it was exceptionally difficult for new companies to become established (Bartlett, R. (2005:282)). Thus, the result of Gorbachëv's economic reforms was merely to weaken state control of the economy while at the same time failing to create a private market strong enough to provide any sort of direction: the economy found itself dangerously dislocated and directionless (Acton, E. (1986:318)). If one justification for the CPSU's domination was to protect the populace from economic hardship, it was demonstrably failing in its duty. People, not unreasonably, began to turn away.

By 1989, many of the states comprising the Soviet 'Outer Empire' in Eastern Europe had begun agitating for independence and Gorbachëv let it be known that the USSR was no longer willing to maintain the bloc by military force. Thus, in 1989 the Berlin wall fell and a number of East European states duly broke away from the Soviet Union. Such actions served to encourage nationalist movements within the Union itself and legislation pushed through the All-Union CPD by Gorbachëv aided those who sought autonomy by committing the central administration to holding republic elections to individual Supreme Soviets in all of the Union Republics (Acton, E. (1986:333)). Most disturbingly for Gorbachëv was the role played by republican leaders of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR), which held elections to a Russian CPD. This represented a wider movement to strengthen RSFSR autonomy within the Union and went as far as a declaration by the Russian CPD of Russian state sovereignty (Bartlett, R. (2005:284)). The other Union Republics followed suit and thus began the devolution of all significant power to republic level, a process which would utterly emasculate the All-Union administration. Events now began to run away from Gorbachëv. Initially he attempted to satiate the demands of republicans and economic radicals with the '500 Days' programme of reforms, but swiftly deferred in the face of mounting opposition from the conservative right. To placate this group in turn he appointed a number of conservatives to prominent positions, such as that of Vice President, Prime Minister, Defence Minister and Head of the KGB (all at Union level) (Bartlett, R. (2005:285)). Finally, as a result of growing discontent, including the deployment of Soviet troops in Vilnius and Riga, Gorbachëv offered a referendum on the continuation of the USSR at all in March 1991. In those republics which participated (there were six boycotts) significant pro-Union majorities were returned and talks began for revision of the existing Union Treaty of 1922 in April. In Russia, the vote was linked to the creation of an independent Russian Presidency. The talks, at which Russia was represented by Yeltsin, drafted a treaty for a much looser union of 'Sovereign States' and was to be signed by the nine participating republics in August. Meanwhile, Yeltsin, already Chairman of the Russian CPD, was elected to the new Russian Presidency in a landslide victory, thus winning the moral authority of a public mandate that Gorbachëv lacked (Bartlett, R. (2005:285)).

Prior to the signing of the new Union Treaty on 20<sup>th</sup> August, the document was released to the public (on the 14<sup>th</sup>). However, the hope that it would settle the Union question was dashed five days later when the same ultra-conservatives recently installed by Gorbachëv launched a '*coup d'état*' aimed at averting the break-up of the Union. Gorbachëv was placed under house arrest at his holiday home in the Crimea and troops

were deployed on the streets of Moscow. However, the plotters committed various critical errors in their execution. They failed to arrest Yeltsin or his principle supporters who, with the aid of unarmed Muscovite civilians, made a valiant stand at the 'White House', the seat of the Russian President and Russian CPD, despite the preponderance of rebel tanks (Bartlett, R. (2005:286)). Meeting with widespread popular resistance the coup quickly broke down and the plotters were arrested. The outcome of the coup was the complete reverse of the plotters' intentions, turning people against the CPSU and the All-Union institutions it represented. Indeed, in September the All-Union CPD, so closely associated with the then suspended CPSU, dissolved itself and by November the CPSU had been banned in Russia altogether. With the CPSU massively discredited, the All-Union CPD dissolved and the RSFSR moving apparently inexorably towards its own autonomy, the other republics followed suit. Georgia and Lithuania had actually declared independence prior to the failed coup but following it a number of other republics made similar moves as attempts by Gorbachëv and Yeltsin to instigate another round of talks for further revision of the union made no progress. The fatal blow to the Union came when a number of core republics opted to form their own 'Commonwealth of Independent States' and collectively declared the USSR at an end. Soon, the remaining republics joined the founding Slavic states, Gorbachëv resigned his Presidency of a country which effectively no longer existed and on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics officially came to an end (Bartlett, R. (2005:287)).

In summary, there were, of course, a great many factors contributing to the fall of the USSR. They gain their significance by the way they interact and coalesced to bring about the Union's ultimate demise. For example, the democratisation of the state would not have proved dangerous to the CPSU's position or to the system itself if the circumstances had been such so as to encourage mass public support for the Party. In the event no such circumstances prevailed at that time and the granting of various rights to the people by the Party was not enough to compensate them for the Party's shortcomings and ongoing failure to effectively lead the state. With diminishing positive reason to support the CPSU and the Union it represented, the people, including members of the political elites, began to lose their fondness for maintaining the Union. The Union's difficulties were compounded further by its (or rather Gorbachëv's) own actions, most notably with the creation of the All-Union CPD and the impact that body was to have. This democratising impetus of Gorbachëv's also contributed to the devolution of certain economic powers to the regional level which, in the faltering economy, inevitably led to regional protectionism which was itself in turn exacerbated by the granting of greater power to regional and eventually republic level political bodies, all moves passed by Gorbachëv's All-Union CPD. The accumulative effect of these developments was to create an environment in which Union disintegration became possible while discarding the sort of powers which the central administration would require in order to counter it. Thus, by the beginning of the 1990s there were ample reasons one could find for leaving the Union; disillusionment with the regime (particularly following the August *coup*) and a failing economy amongst them. As a result of Gorbachëv's *glasnost* reforms people were, for the first time, able to openly contemplate such an extreme move and with the Union Republics, most importantly the RSFSR, forming their own administrative systems there was now an alternative to remaining in the Union. To conclude, the accumulative effect of the six years from Gorbachëv's ascent to the Union's disintegration saw the Soviet people given ample reason to doubt the wisdom of remaining a part of the Union, be given the power to act on their doubts, saw the Union Republics gain the power to resist

the centre, even to secede, and saw the central administration be denuded of the power to stop them, had it even have wanted to: the result was then, perhaps, inevitable.

## **Bibliography**

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