

History, The Red Giant: Rise and Fall of the USSR

A Brief History of Russia, Part 5

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Global Research, July 16, 2018

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Part 4 of this series aimed at explaining how a combination of diverse economic, social and political events resulted in the successive Russian Revolutions. With the Romanov Dynasty deposed, Bolshevik leaders faced a paradox while implementing the USSR in 1922: they had to reconcile the goal of achieving political unity on an enormous scale without giving in to the temptation of systematically using authoritarian means to do so. Otherwise, a reminiscent flavor of tsarism would blow upon the newly formed government structure and fuel the angry masses' urge for violent political change ... In this perspective, the resistance faced by Red Army troops in Central Asia only one year after the creation of the USSR was symptomatic of the difficulty to rule a supranational entity. In this region, armed Islamic guerrillas known as basmachi had formed to fight the Bolshevik takeover. The Soviet government did not manage to dismantle this group entirely until 1934. [1]

The history of the USSR can essentially be broken down into five periods, each dominated by the personality of the Politburo's leader: Leninism (1922-1924), Stalinism after a sort of second 'Time of Troubles' following Lenin's death (1928-1953), De-Stalinization under Khrushchev (1953-1964), the 'Era of Stagnation' under Brezhnev (1964-1982) and liberal reform attempts under Gorbachev (1985-1991).

The chief goal of this series being to propose a global and balanced analysis regarding Russia's stance in international relations on a long-term horizon, less attention will be given to some otherwise important events in domestic affairs. First, a short discussion of the USSR's ideology and its evolution is necessary to understand soviet foreign policy.

Ideology and Objectives of the USSR on the International Stage

The core theory of Soviet foreign policy was set forth in Lenin's Decree on Peace, adopted by the Second Congress of Soviets in November 1917. It asserts the dual nature of the USSR's foreign policy, which intends to be a mix of both 'proletarian internationalism' and 'peaceful coexistence'. Directly stemming from Marxist theory, the former refers to the working classes' worldwide struggle to overthrow the *bourgeois* State in order to establish communist regimes. The latter is a doctrine coined by Khrushchev whose goal is to ensure pacified bilateral relations with capitalist states. The support provided to peoples struggling for independence in the Third World was in line with the first pillar of Soviet foreign policy but it did so at the cost of increasing difficulty for the second one to be a stable reality in

international relations. [2]

Although priorities were subject to change, two basic goals of Soviet foreign policy remained constant: maintaining influence over Eastern Europe (since the late 1940s) and ensuring national security through the maintenance of adequate military forces and internal control within the Communist Party. [3] To achieve the latter goal, the Soviet Union focused on its relations with the United States, leader of the Western bloc. Relations with Eastern Europe (the other members of the Warsaw Pact) and Western Europe (the European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—NATO) came in second position regarding foreign policy priorities. Finally, a lesser degree of importance was given to Japan and some states located along the southern border of the Soviet Union (especially China, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey which is a NATO member. Other regions received marginal attention, except those bordering strategic naval straits or sea lanes, or providing opportunities to establish strategic bases.

Generally speaking, until the 1980s Soviet foreign policy had been most concerned with balance of power between members of the Warsaw Pact and those of NATO, then Soviet leaders pursued improved relations with all regions of the world. [3]

Political Structure of the Soviet Union

The new nation included four constituent republics: the Russian SFSR, the Ukrainian SSR, the Belarusian SSR, and the Transcaucasian SFSR (which was comprised of today's Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia).

In 1924, a constitution was ratified and it established a federal system of government based on a succession of soviets set up in villages, factories, and cities in larger regions. In each constituent republic, this pyramid of soviets culminated in the All-Union Congress of Soviets. This body was supposed to exercise sovereign power, but in reality it was governed by the Communist Party, which in turn was controlled by the Politburo from Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Union. The October Revolution had shifted the center of power back to the Third Rome, just as it had been under the tsars before Peter the Great. [4]

A New Economic Policy (NEP)

From 1917 to 1921, the Bolshevik Revolution knew a period of consolidation known as 'war communism'. Mass nationalizations were carried out over land, industry, and small businesses. Unrests followed shortly afterwards, as peasants wanted cash payments for their products and protested having to surrender their surplus grain to the government in the context of civil war policies.

The New Economic Policy (NEP) was designed by Lenin precisely to answer peasant opposition, by including a few capitalistic features on the commodity market: to name a few, peasants were allowed to sell their surplus production on the open market and freed from wholesale levies of grain. Besides, commerce was stimulated by permitting private retail trading while the state continued to be responsible for heavy industry, banking, transportation and public utilities. The program proved highly beneficial and the economy revived through increased trade. However, following Lenin's death in early 1924 the NEP came under increasing opposition within the party, as rich peasants (*kulaks*) were accused of betraying the Revolution. [5]

Russian Society in Upheaval

While the Russian economy underwent significant changes, social life was being transformed in an equally important manner. The main features of this evolution will be briefly discussed in the following paragraphs.

First, the new regime implemented a 'sovietization' policy on minority groups living in the USSR. It can be defined as the adoption of Soviet-like institutions, laws, customs and traditions in order to create a common way of life in all States within the Soviet sphere of influence. To further advance cohesion in the new nation, medical services were extended, which was also necessary to increase productivity and keep a viable army. Notable medical campaigns included those against cholera, typhus and malaria. Public investments were made to develop medical facilities and medicine was defined as a priority field of education by the central government.

These efforts combined with the economic benefits of the NEP helped decreasing infant mortality rates and increasing life expectancy. [6]

In accordance with marxism, the government also promoted atheism. Its objective was to break the power of the Russian Orthodox Church, a major barrier to social change and a former pillar of the tsarist regime. This policy was implemented in a mainly repressive way: many religious leaders were sent to internal exile camps and members of the party were forbidden to attend religious services. Meanwhile, the education system was separated from the Church to keep control over teaching materials. [7]

Besides, the role of women slowly began to change: abortion was legalized as early as 1920 while divorce no longer required court procedure. The gradual emancipation of women led them to get an education and pursue a career. It became possible after efforts were made to shift the center of people's social life from home to educational and recreational groups, called the 'soviet clubs'. [8]

However, the 1929-1939 decade was particularly tumultuous due to massive industrialization and internal struggles as Stalin eventually managed to establish near total control over Soviet society. Indeed, following Lenin's death in 1924 Stalin wrestled to gain control of the Soviet Union with rival factions in the Politburo, especially Trotsky's. By 1928, most Trotskyists were either exiled or rendered powerless as a result of Stalin's rise as the unchallenged leader of the USSR. [9]

One year later, he proposed the First Five-Year Plan, thereby abolishing the NEP: key components of the policy program were shifting the economy's center of gravity to heavy industry, restrictions on the manufacture of consumer goods and collectivization of agriculture. For the first time in history, a government had complete control over all national economic activity. [10]

With a clear focus on Ukraine, the Soviet government took control of agriculture through State and collective farms (*kolkhozes*). In February 1930, a decree forced about one million individual peasants (*kulaks*) off their land. Many of them slaughtered their own herds when faced with the loss of their land, among other types of protest, which resulted in countless executions. The combination of harsh weather, dysfunction of the hastily established collective farms, and massive confiscation of grain produced a serious famine, which killed several million peasants, mostly in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and parts of southwestern Russia.

The deteriorating conditions in the countryside fueled an uncontrolled urbanization. [11]

Meanwhile, the political police (NKVD) carried out tens of thousands of arrests, deportations and executions on behalf of Stalin, thus reminding Soviet citizens the worst times of autocratic rule under tsars Ivan IV, Nicholas I and Alexander III, certainly even surpassing them. Besides, the five original members of the 1917 Politburo who survived Lenin (Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Sokolnikov and Bubnov) were all purged by Stalin. Old Bolsheviks who had stayed loyal to Lenin, high officers in the Red Army, and directors of industry were liquidated in the Great Purges under the command of NKVD's director Yezhov (known as the 'Bloody Dwarf'). The total of people imprisoned or executed during the 'Reign of Yezhov' (*Yezhovschina*) amounted to about two million [12]

At the climax of Stalin's paranoia, many citizens were prosecuted for fictitious crimes including sabotage and espionage, inspiring major pamphlets such as Kafka's masterpiece *The Trial*. In any case, the labor provided by inmates working in the labor camps of the Gulag system became an important component of the industrialization effort, especially in Siberia. Indeed, an estimated 18 million people passed through the Gulag system, while it is argued that another 15 million had experienced some other form of forced labor. [13]

Soviet Union's Stance on the International Stage before World War II

Several distinct phases occurred in Soviet foreign policy between the conclusion of the Russian Civil War and the Nazi-Soviet Non Aggression Pact in 1939. Each was partly influenced by political struggles within the USSR and partly driven by dynamic developments in international relations and their effect on Soviet security.



Red guard unit of the Vulkan factory in Petrograd. (Source: Public Domain)

Lenin believed that the October Revolution would ignite a 'World Socialist Revolution'. The Communist International (Comintern) was set up precisely to export revolution to the rest of Europe and Asia. [14]

The first priority for Soviet foreign policy was Europe, especially Germany, which was the country that Lenin considered most ready for revolution. According to Robert Service,

Bolshevik leaders had a very idealized picture of Germany and Lenin was extremely disappointed when the October Revolution did not bring about a similar revolution there as he had expected. Shortly after, in March 1918, Russia ended its participation in World War I by signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) at an enormous territorial cost (see previous part of this series). Afterwards, a new foreign policy doctrine emerged, according to which Russia should seek both a pragmatic co-operation with Western powers when it suited its interests and the promotion of a Communist revolution abroad whenever possible, based on Lenin's critique of imperialism. [15]

However, the Russian Civil War required using the bulk of the country's military resources. Therefore, Lenin could not send the Red Army into Central Europe in 1919 to export Communism. By the way, his approach was quite paradoxical: on one hand, he supported the right of nations to self-determination in western colonies but on the other hand he discarded this possibility for peoples that were in the Russian sphere of influence and was ready to use force to spread the communist ideology. After realizing that capitalism was not going to collapse at once as he had hoped, Lenin made a major effort in the early 1920s to increase German foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Soviet Union as a way of modernizing the country. In order to form a German-Soviet alliance, the Soviets signed the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922, under which each renounced all territorial and financial claims against the other following the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. [16]

One year before, the revolutionary era ended after Russia's defeat in the war with Poland. As European revolutions were crushed, the Bolsheviks shifted their ideological focus from the world revolution to building socialism inside the Soviet Union, while keeping some of the rhetoric and operations of the Comintern continuing. In the mid-1920s, a policy of peaceful co-existence began to emerge, with Soviet diplomats concluding bilateral agreements with Western governments, including one with Germany (Treaty of Rapallo, 1922). [17]

However, there were still members of the Soviet government who kept arguing for the continuation of the revolutionary process, especially Trotsky with his theory of Permanent Revolution. After Lenin's death in 1924, two rival sides faced each other in the Politburo: Trotsky and the internationalists were opposed by Stalin and Bukharin, who developed the concept of Socialism in One Country. In the field of foreign policy, Permanent Revolution gave birth to the United Front, which consisted in convincing foreign Communists to enter into alliances with liberal reformist parties and national liberation movements of all kinds. It became a source of bitter dispute with Trotsky, who received support from some influential American corporations in his struggle against Stalin. [18]

In 1928, after defeating Trotsky, Zinoviev and Bukharin in the power race for control of the Politburo, Stalin formulated a new doctrine in the International called Third Period, which argued that social-democracy was a form of social fascism, socialist in theory but fascist in practice. All foreign Communist parties were to concentrate their efforts in a struggle against their rivals in the working-class movement, thereby ruling out the possibility of united fronts against a greater enemy. The direct result of this policy was the destruction of the German Communist Party (one of the strongest in Europe, along with its Italian and French counterparts) after Hitler's election in 1933. Soviet-German cooperation, which had been extensive until then, was now limited. [19]

Litvinov, the Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs between 1930 and 1939, aimed at closer alliances with Western governments and placed ever greater emphasis on collective

security. That's why the Soviet Union joined the League of Nations in 1934 and concluded alliances with France and Czechoslovakia. In the League, the Soviets were always prompt to demand action against 'imperialist aggressions', especially in the wake of the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria, which eventually resulted in the Soviet-Japanese Battle of Khalkhin Gol. However, against the rise of fascism, the League was unlikely to accomplish anything mainly due to the lack of sanction power and heavy financing of fascist regimes by a handful of major Western banks and corporations, including Ford, IBM or Brown Brothers Harriman & Co (one of the bank's partner being Prescott Bush). [20]

In this context, Litvinov and others in the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs continued to conduct diplomatic initiatives with anti-communist Nazi Germany, while the USSR supported the Popular Front government in Spain in order to try preserving the Second Republic from the 1936 Fascist rebellion led by Franco. Two years later, Germany annexed Austria and the Munich Agreement could be seen as the first stage in the dismantlement of Czechoslovakia, for Germany, Hungary and Poland divided parts of the country between themselves without opposition from other Western powers.

Consequently, the Soviets feared that they were likely to be abandoned as well should a war with Germany occur. Besides, between 1938 and 1939 the Soviet Union had to fight against Imperial Japan in the Russian Far East, which led to Soviet-Japanese neutrality and the tense border peace that lasted until August 1945.

In May 1939, Litvinov was replaced by Molotov after failing to adopt a common stance with Great Britain and France about Germany. From now on, the Soviets no longer sought collective but individual security through modernization of its army and the non-aggression pact signed with Nazi Germany known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The USSR thereby thought to protect itself from the most aggressive European power while also managing to spread its sphere of influence by dividing Eastern Europe with Germany: the latter was to receive Western Poland and Lithuania while the USSR was to take control of Eastern Poland, Finland, Latvia, Estonia and Bessarabia (the bulk of which is now part of Moldova, whereas the southern regions bordering the Black Sea and the northernmost regions are part of Ukraine). Some territories that had been lost by Soviet Russia in the aftermath of WWI (Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, 1918) were therefore in the process of being recovered in the wake of the second world conflict ... [21]

Soviet Foreign Policy during World War II

On 17 September 1939, seventeen days after the start of World War II by the German invasion of Poland, the Red Army advanced into eastern portions of the latter country stating the 'cessation of existence' of the Polish State as the justification of this action combined with the 'need to protect Ukrainians and Belarusians' there. As a consequence, the Ukrainian and Belarusian's western borders changed dramatically and the new Soviet western border was drawn close to the original Curzon line. [22]

Meanwhile, the negotiations with Finland about the Soviet-proposed redrawing of the Soviet-Finnish border further away from Leningrad failed. In retaliation, the USSR started a campaign against Finland in December 1939, known as the Winter War (1939-40). It resulted in a heavy death toll on the Red Army but forced Finland to sign the Moscow Peace Treaty and to cede the Karelian Isthmus and Ladoga Karelia. [23]

Then, in the summer of 1940 the USSR issued an ultimatum to Romania to force it to cede

the territories of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. At the same time, the Soviet Union also occupied the three formerly independent Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia). [24]

After ignoring repeated warnings by senior officials including Molotov (Commissar for Foreign Affairs), Timoshenko (Commissar for Defense) and Zhukov (Chief of Staff of the Red Army), Stalin was stunned when Hitler invaded the USSR in June 1941. Following a series of summit meetings, the Soviet leader came to terms with Great-Britain and the United States. The later massively supplied war materials through the Lend Lease policy. [25]

By the autumn, the *Wehrmacht* had seized Ukraine, besieged Leningrad (Saint Petersburg), and threatened to capture Moscow. In December 1941, thanks to a successful counterattack the Red Army threw off the German forces from Moscow but the Nazis had still enough resources for approximately another year and carried out a deep offensive in the south-eastern direction, reaching the Volga and the Caucasus. The turning point of the entire World War happened to be the battle of Stalingrad (now Volgograd, in Southern Russia) for Germans never regained the ability to sustain offensive operations on the Eastern Front and the Soviet Union recaptured the initiative for the rest of the conflict. Lasting a little over five months, it is often regarded as the single largest and bloodiest battle in the history of warfare. It is estimated that the Axis suffered around 850,000 total casualties (killed, wounded and captured) among all branches of the German armed forces and its allies, while the USSR suffered 1,129,619 total casualties according to official archives. [26]



Red Army soldiers display a captured Finnish banner, March 1940 (Source: Public Domain)

By the end of 1943, the Red Army managed to break through the siege of Leningrad, had freed much of Western Russia and Ukraine and was moving into Belarus. One year later, the Eastern Front had moved beyond the 1939 frontiers of the USSR and Soviet forces began to drive into Eastern Germany, eventually capturing Berlin in May 1945.

The last Soviet battle of World War II occurred in Manchuria three months after Victory Day in Europe, where the USSR defeated the Japanese troops. World War II casualties amounted to around 27 million people for the Soviet Union, which corresponds to about half of the war's total casualties. [27]

Although the Soviet Union was victorious in World War II, its economy was devastated. Over

1,700 towns were destroyed. In occupied territories, thirteen million Soviet citizens suffered from mass murders, deportation, slave labor, famine and absence of elementary medical aid while the Gulag system and collectivization produced similar results in other parts of the Union. The Nazi Genocide led to the almost complete annihilation of the Jewish population over the entire territory occupied by Germany and its allies, while Leningrad's region and Belarus lost respectively around a quarter and between a quarter and a third of their population. Moreover, out of 5.5 million Soviet prisoners of war 3.6 million died in German camps. [28]

Cold War and the Emergence of a Dual World

The latent conflict between American and Soviet national interests known as the Cold War, came to dominate the international stage in the postwar period. It emerged in July 1945 during the Potsdam Conference, when Stalin and Truman discussed the future of Eastern Europe. Key provisions of the Potsdam agreement included:

1. Denazification of the German society by removing from positions of power those who had been members of the Nazi Party and by disbanding the organizations associated with this ideology.
2. Demilitarization of the German arms industry and former *Wehrmacht* forces.
3. Democratization by restoring freedom of speech, religion, assembly and the press, resulting in the formation of new political parties and trade unions.
4. Decentralization, which would ultimately lead to German federalism. At that time, Germany was divided into four occupation zones following the Yalta Agreement: the Western part of the country was split between the United States, Great Britain and France while the Eastern one was handed down to the Soviet Union.
5. Reparation payments from Germany to the USSR.
6. Establishment of a Provisional Government of National Unity in Poland. [29]

Stalin aimed at establishing a buffer zone of states between Germany and the Soviet Union, for Russia had suffered three devastating Western invasions during the Napoleonic Wars, the First World War, and the Second World War. He was also buying time, as the Soviet atomic bomb project was steadily progressing in secret to offset the American monopoly in this field following completion of the Manhattan Project led by physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer. To maintain technological advantage over the USSR, the US government hired top-level former Nazi scientists as part of Operation Paperclip in the immediate aftermath of the war, especially for its space program. Some of the most influential scientists recruited through this policy include Wernher von Braun (inventor of the V-2 rocket and the Saturn V launch vehicle, used on the Apollo space program), Ernst Stuhlinger (developed guidance systems with von Braun's team on behalf of the US Army), Georg von Tiesenhausen (credited with the first complete design of the Lunar Rover), Eberhard Rees (became the second director of NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center), Walter Schreiber (one of the foremost experts in epidemiology at the time, invited to the US after WWI when the Federal government first sought to assess the feasibility of using biological warfare agents in future military conflicts) and Hans K. Ziegler (a pioneer in the field of communication satellites who ultimately became Director of the US Army Electronics Technology & Devices Laboratory). [30]

On the other side, Truman accused Stalin of betraying the Yalta Agreement, as the Red Army occupied Eastern Europe. Indeed, in Yalta Stalin pledged to permit free elections in

Poland but political repression was implemented instead, culminating in the 'Trial of the Sixteen'. The Government Delegate, together with most members of the Council of National Unity and the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Army, which was the main Polish resistance movement in World War II, were invited by Soviet general Serov to a conference on their eventual entry to the Provisional Government. It was an ambush, for they were arrested by the NKVD under the command of Beria and brought to Moscow where they were tortured and presented with false accusations, including collaboration with Nazi Germany and propaganda against the USSR. As reported by Montefiore, Beria was introduced by Stalin to Roosevelt at the Yalta Conference as 'our Himmler', which gives a rather precise idea of his importance in the Soviet police State and the level of cruelty he achieved to deserve this title. [31]

A puppet government was installed in Poland exactly during the trial in March 1945, while other occupied countries would soon be converted into satellite States as well (Hungary and Czechoslovakia in Central Europe; Romania, Bulgaria and Albania in the Balkans). As a result, Soviet foreign policy was arguably at least as focused on maintaining hegemony over Eastern Europe as it was on enhancing of national security at that time. Soviet foreign policy was famously denounced by Churchill's Iron Curtain speech in 1946. [32]

In March 1947, the Truman Doctrine was formulated to expressly 'contain' Soviet imperialism, thereby marking the official start of the Cold War. It can be defined as the ideological struggle between the US and the USSR for the defense of their respective hegemonic spheres of influence and for the planetary domination of the socio-economic system each advocated. As a result, States were divided into three groups: the First World comprised the United States and their allies; the Second World was made of the USSR, their allies and China; whereas the Third World was defined as the sum of neutral and non-aligned countries. The latter term was coined by Sauvy, a French demographer in reference to the three estates in pre-revolutionary France, the first two estates being the nobility and clergy with everybody else comprising the third estate. He thus compared the capitalist world to the nobility and the communist world to the clergy, while all the countries that were not included in this Cold War division were called the Third World. [33]

In 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was formed in the wake of the Berlin blockade by Soviet forces one year before as a mutual defense pact between most Western nations whereby an armed attack against one nation would be considered as an assault on all. The same year, the U.S. nuclear monopoly ended and the Communist revolution occurred in China, giving a more global scope to the opposition between Eastern and Western blocs.

In 1955, an Eastern counterpart to NATO known as the Warsaw Pact was established following the Zhdanov Doctrine (1946), which opposed the 'democratic' and 'imperialistic' worlds headed respectively by the USSR and the US, whose main outcome has been control of cultural production within the Soviet Union. Political order within satellite States was to be maintained by force, the most famous examples of this policy being the quelling of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, later followed by the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the Solidarity movement (*Solidarnosc*) in Poland in the early 1980s. [34]

De-Stalinization and 'Peaceful Coexistence' under Khrushchev



Stalin died in March 1953, succeeded by Khrushchev as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) with Malenkov as Premier of the Soviet Union. However, the central figure in the immediate post-Stalin period was Beria, First Deputy Premier and former head of the NKVD, forming the ruling 'troika' with Molotov and Malenkov until his death in December of the same year. Against all odds, Beria initiated a period of relative liberalization including the release of some political prisoners and allowing criticism of Stalin, to the extent that his dictatorship betrayed the principles laid down by Lenin. In addition, the Baltic States were given prospects of national autonomy. In science, the world's first nuclear power plant was established in Obninsk (near Moscow) in 1954.

However, other Politburo members feared Beria for his role under Stalin and had him arrested. At the end of the year, he was shot following a show trial where he was accused of spying for the West, committing sabotage, and plotting to restore capitalism. The secret police were disarmed and reorganized into the KGB, so that they remained under complete control of the party. Khrushchev emerged as the key figure in the post-Beria period. [35]

During the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU (1956), Khrushchev shocked the audience with a speech entitled 'On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences' which also mentioned the crimes committed by Stalin's closest associates, thereby stripping the legitimacy of the remaining Stalinist faction. The main consequence of Khrushchev's takeover was the liberation of millions of political prisoners: the Gulag population declined from 13 million in 1953 to 5 million in 1957. It was part of a larger shift in political, economic and cultural life in the Soviet Union known as "The Thaw", especially important regarding industrial policy which now put more emphasis on producing commodity goods, allowing living standards to rise dramatically while maintaining high levels of economic growth. [36]

Besides, he advocated a new foreign policy doctrine called 'Peaceful Coexistence' whereby the orthodox view of war between the capitalist and communist worlds ceased to be seen as inevitable. In a perfect Marxist tradition, he argued that competition with the West rather than outright hostility would be sufficient given that capitalism would decay from within, thereby expressing a political counterpart to the 'tendency of the rate of profit to fall' in economics.

However, Khrushchev made clear that if Western countries desired war, the Soviet Union would fight back. Obviously, the same held true for satellite countries in Central and Eastern Europe: as a result of the censorship easing, some critics were voiced in the arts and public spheres, tolerated as long they did not break into riots such as in Poland in the summer of 1956. When the local communist party elected Gomułka without consulting the Kremlin in October of the same year, it almost triggered a Soviet invasion. Due to Gomułka's popularity, a deal was made instead: Poland was to remain a member of the Warsaw Pact but the USSR granted itself the right to intervene in its neighbors' domestic and external affairs. The next month saw a way more brutal solution enforced, as the Hungarian Revolution was crushed by Soviet troops resulting in around 2,500–3,000 casualties, while nearly a quarter million left the country as refugees.

Then, in 1957 Khrushchev defeated a Stalinist coup by the so-called "Anti-Party Group". However, none of the plotters were killed or even arrested, including the leaders: Malenkov was sent to manage a power station in Kazakhstan while Molotov was named ambassador to Mongolia and later became the Soviet representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency. [37]

Regarding diplomacy, Khrushchev also introduced a significant shift for he began reaching out to newly independent countries in Africa and Asia (in sharp contrast to Stalin's Europe-centered foreign policy) and also became the first Soviet leader to visit the US, in September 1959. Scientific research focused on space technology and weaponry combined to aid to developing countries maintained the USSR as one of the world's two major world powers. The most notable accomplishments of the Soviet space program were launching the first artificial Earth satellite in history (Sputnik 1), which orbited the Earth in 1957, taking the first photo of the far side of the Moon (1959), launching the first probe to another planet (Venera 1, which approached Venus in 1961), sending the first man into space (Gagarin) that same year and carrying out the first spacewalk (Leonov) four years later. [38]

Other Reforms and Khrushchev's Fall

Connected with the decentralization of industry and agriculture was Khrushchev's decision in 1962 to recast party organizations along economic rather than administrative lines. The resulting shift of the party apparatus at the province (*oblast*) level and below discontented many party officials at all levels. In 1963, the abandonment of Khrushchev's special seven-year economic plan (1959-65) two years short of its completion was symptomatic of the country's economic difficulties and bureaucratic struggles. [39]

In defense policy, Khrushchev decided to cut military expenditures, arguing that the Soviet nuclear arsenal was an adequate deterrent to outside aggression contrary to the opinion of key figures in the Soviet military establishment. Besides, the ongoing crisis in Berlin reached its climax with the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 under initiative of the East German authorities in reaction to mass emigration, especially skilled workers. Overall, it is estimated that approximately 20% of the entire East German population had left by 1961, i.e 3.5 million people. An important reason the West Berlin border was not closed earlier was that doing so would have cut off much of the railway traffic in East Germany. In 1961 precisely, the Berlin outer ring (a new railway bypassing West Berlin) was completed ... [40]

By 1964, Khrushchev's prestige had been seriously damaged in a number of key areas.

First, even though industrial production, consumer goods and living standards were still growing at a fast pace, the agricultural sector faced a bad harvest in 1963, significantly decreasing agricultural production.

Abroad, the Sino-Soviet split which began in 1960 coupled with the Berlin and Cuban Missile Crisis (respectively 1961 and 1962) were seen as political liabilities for the Soviet leader, especially in the military. Regarding relations with China, the major factors explaining their deterioration are Mao Zedong's rejection of peaceful coexistence (perceived as Marxist revisionism) and the destalinization policy combined with competition between the two Eastern powers to control Asian communist parties.

Furthermore, Khrushchev was subject of a growing personality cult, which was especially noticeable at the celebration of his 70th birthday in 1964 and he constantly travelled abroad, which made it easier for plots to be formed against him. Indeed, in October 1964 he was unanimously voted out of office while he was on holiday in Crimea and replaced by Brezhnev as First Secretary. [41]

The Brezhnev Era (1964-1982)

This period is often called the 'Era of Stagnation' (a formula coined by Gorbachev) due to poor economic performance during the second part of Brezhnev's rule.

It began with high economic growth and soaring prosperity as measured by GDP per capita, which grew at a steady pace of 3.5% per annum from 1964 to 1973 (slightly less than in the last years of Khrushchev's rule) following a significant development of higher education and the 'Kosygin reform' (1965-1970). Besides, consumption per capita rose by an estimated 70% under Brezhnev but roughly three quarters of this growth happened in the first half of the period.

The main features of Kosygin's plan were a decentralizing of the enterprise incentive system (including wider usage of capitalist-style material incentives for good performance) combined with the empowerment of several central ministries which had lost influence under Khrushchev. Nevertheless, this unachieved decentralization created administrative obstacles, one of the most important being price setting by central administrators.

The period ended with a much weaker Soviet Union facing major economic, social and political struggles mainly due to inertia, massive corruption (data falsification became common practice among bureaucrats to report satisfied targets and quotas to the government), a reverse move towards full-scale central planning and the Nixon Shock (1973) which resulted in massive currency volatility following the unilateral cancellation of the direct convertibility of the US dollar to gold. Moreover, diseases were on the rise because of the decaying health care system, while the average living space remained below First World standards (about 13 square meters per capita) and homelessness also became an urging social issue. Most importantly, during Brezhnev's rule life expectancy decreased by nearly five years whereas Soviet citizens used to enjoy a higher average than their American counterparts in 1962. Poor agricultural output performances were a prime explanation of this phenomenon and by Brezhnev's final year, food shortages reached disturbing levels of frequency. Despite the utter failure of collective farming, the Soviet government remained committed to reducing food imports from the West, even cheaper commodities. They did so not only for reasons of national pride, but out of fear of becoming dependent on capitalist countries for basic necessities. Particularly embarrassing to the regime was the fact that even bread had become rationed, although its availability was a priority of economic policy. [42]

Pollution and environmental damage became a growing concern especially where the government carried out nuclear weapons testing, such as in Kazakhstan. On the other hand, the USSR was able to keep its superpower status thanks to the military buildup of the 1960's and achieved inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) parity with the United States in 1966. [43]

Charged with the failure of his reforms, Khrushchev was also criticized for his autocratic rule and disregard for Party institutions. The new government was rather of bureaucratic nature, with four key advisors to the First Secretary forming together a collective leadership: Kosygin as Chairman of the Council of Ministers ('Premier'), Suslov as Chief Ideologue, Kirilenko as organizational secretary and Mikoyan as Chairman of the Politburo. [44]

Kosygin was replaced by Podgorny when it was decided in high spheres that his economic reform program was no longer suitable. As early as 1970, Brezhnev started conspiring against the new Premier because of his rank as first in the Soviet diplomatic protocol. However, his attempts remained unsuccessful for much of the period because of a lack of

support in the Politburo, since the removal of Podgorny would have meant weakening the power of the collective leadership itself. Brezhnev's tolerance of critics from Yugoslavia and his disarmament talks with Western powers, were not policies which pleased hardline Soviet officials either. According to Robert Service, even if Brezhnev talked of the need to 'renew' the party cadres, his 'self-interest discouraged him from putting an end to the immobilism he detected. He did not want to risk alienating lower-level officialdom.' Indeed, the Politburo saw the policy of stabilization as the only way to avoid returning to Stalin's purges and Khrushchev's re-organization of Party-Government institutions. [45]

In 1977, the First Secretary eventually managed to secure enough backing in the Politburo to oust Podgorny from office, while also stopping increases in military investments at the level deemed sufficient to protect national security, a policy that would be maintained under Andropov, Chernenko and Gorbachev. [46]

During his rule, Brezhnev was also the Chairman of the Constitutional Commission of the Supreme Soviet, which worked on drafting a new constitution. The resulting document can be seen as proof of the limits of de-Stalinization, in the sense that it enhanced the status of the individual in all matters of life, while at the same time solidifying the Party's hold on power. In late 1977, the Politburo established a new position of 'First Deputy Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet' (thereby reaching a new height in bureaucratic wording), a post similar to a 'vice-president', to cope with Brezhnev's deteriorated health condition. The 76 year-old Kuznetsov was unanimously approved for this job and the collective leadership took an even more important role in everyday decision-making. At that time, the Soviet government turned into a gerontocracy, i.e the rulers were significantly older than most of the adult population (the average age of the Politburo's members was 71 years old in 1981). For this reason, Brezhnev's death in 1982 did not alter the balance of power in any meaningful way: Andropov and Chernenko, respectively chairman of the KGB and second to the General Secretary, were obliged by protocol to rule the country in the same fashion as Brezhnev left it. Towards the end of his life, the latter was more focused on developing his own cult of personality than ruling the USSR, and awarded himself the highest military decorations. The height of absurdity was reached when a 'Lenin Prize for Literature' was awarded to Brezhnev's 'trilogy', three auto-biographical novels ... In 1980, Kosygin died one day before Brezhnev's birthday and the media (including Pravda) postponed the reporting of his death until after the First Secretary's birthday celebration. [47]

As for Soviet dissidents and human rights groups, political repression by the KGB tightened during the Brezhnev era. The two leading figures in the dissident movement during the period were Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov. The former, author of the pamphlets *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) and *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973) was forced out of the country in 1974; the latter was forced into internal exile in 1979. The Brezhnev regime also became infamously notorious for using psychiatry as a means of silencing dissent. Many intellectuals, religious figures, and generally speaking anyone protesting their low standard of living were at risk of being ruled clinically insane. For example, it happened in 1978 to Klebanov, who led a group of unemployed miners trying to form a labor union and demanding collective bargaining.

In the religious sphere, Orthodox churches were staffed by docile clergy often tied to the KGB while minority faiths continued to be harassed (especially Islam in the Central Asian republics, where authorities feared a rise of political instability in the wake of the 1979 revolution in Iran). [48]

In technology, the USSR did not follow the path of advanced economies which were moving to computerization after 1965. Central authorities took the poor decision to copy the IBM 360 of 1965, which locked scientists into an outdated system they were unable to improve. Besides, they had major difficulties in manufacturing chips reliably and in quantity, and also in programming efficient softwares. [49]

However, the Soviet Union became a leading producer and exporter of petroleum and natural gas in the 1960's. In 1972, the Ba'ath Party nationalized the Iraq Petroleum Company and the Vice President of Iraq (Saddam Hussein) negotiated a trade agreement and a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union to soften the anticipated loss of revenue. The alliance forced the Ba'athist government to temporarily stop their prosecution of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), which was even awarded two ministries. When world oil prices quadrupled in the 1973-74, it turned the energy sector into the key driver of the Soviet economy, and was used to cover multiple weaknesses. Kosygin once told the head of oil and gas production: 'things are bad with bread. Give me 3 million tons [of oil] over the plan' ... [50]

According to Gaidar (Prime minister of Russia in 1992 and architect of the ill-advised 'shock therapy'): 'The hard currency from oil exports stopped the growing food supply crisis, increased the import of equipment and consumer goods, ensured a financial base for the arms race and the achievement of nuclear parity with the United States, and permitted the realization of such risky foreign-policy actions as the war in Afghanistan.' [51]

Regarding foreign relations, the early part of the era was characterized by the easing of strained relations between the two blocs known as *Détente*, which materialized in arms control and trade agreements, notably the SALT I treaty (1972). It was made possible by a more complicated pattern of international relations in which some less powerful States (the non-aligned countries such as Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Yugoslavia or Congo), had more room to assert their independence thus contributing to the emergence of a less polarized world.

Brandt's ascension to the West German chancellorship in 1969 was equally critical to this diplomatic success. Brandt's Ostpolitik (i.e 'new eastern policy') contributed to the signing of the Moscow and Warsaw Treaties in which West Germany stopped contesting the state borders established following World War II, thereby recognizing East Germany as an independent state. However, the Soviet leadership's policy towards the Eastern Bloc did not change much with Khrushchev's replacement, as the States of Eastern Europe were seen as a buffer zone between the Soviet Union's borders and NATO countries. The leader of Hungary (Kádár) initiated a series of economic reforms similar to Kosygin's program while Gomułka's successor in Poland (Gierek) tried to revitalize the local economy by borrowing money from the First World. Both experiments were approved by the Soviet leadership since it was trying to reduce its large Eastern Bloc subsidy program in the form of cheap oil and gas exports. Dubček's political and economic liberalization policies in Czechoslovakia did not receive the same kind of support however to say the least, which points out once again the incoherent nature of the Soviet decision-making process. In the aftermath of the 1968 invasion, the Brezhnev Doctrine was introduced, stating that the Soviet Union had the right to intervene in any socialist country on the road to communism provided that said country is deviating from the communist norm of development. [52]

In the Far East, Sino-Soviet relations did not improve significantly after Khrushchev's rule. Brezhnev offered a non-aggression pact to China, but it was rejected because its terms

included a renunciation of China's territorial claims. In 1972, Nixon's visit to Beijing aimed at restoring relations with the PRC only confirmed Soviet fears of collusion between its neighbor and the leader of the Western bloc. In short, relations between Moscow and Beijing remained extremely hostile through the entire decade of the 1970's, even after Mao Zedong's death in 1976. After Brezhnev's death, the Soviet leadership actively pursued a soothed foreign policy with China.

The 1975 Helsinki Accords (a Soviet-led initiative) were disappointing in that they were not binding as they did not have treaty status. Notable sections included Sovereign equality (I), 'Refraining from the threat or use of force' (II), Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (VII) and Equal rights and self-determination of peoples (VIII). Ford reaffirmed that the US non-recognition policy of the Baltic States' forced incorporation into the Soviet Union had not changed.

Additionally, relations between the USSR and Iraq soured in 1976 when the Iraq Ba'athist regime started a mass campaign against the ICP. Despite pleas from Brezhnev for clemency, several Iraqi communists were executed publicly [53]

In Southeast Asia, Khrushchev had initially supported North Vietnam out of 'fraternal solidarity', but as the war escalated he urged the North Vietnamese leadership to give up the quest of liberating South Vietnam and advised them to enter negotiations in the United Nations Security Council. With Brezhnev in power, economic and military assistance to the communist resistance in Vietnam resumed and it even became the cornerstone of local socio-economic activity in the post-war period. It is estimated that in the early 1980's 20 to 30% of the rice consumed in Vietnam was supplied by the USSR. The Soviet Union also backed the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia (1978) and the ensuing puppet government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). When Carter complained to Brezhnev about the presence of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia during a 1979 summit, Brezhnev replied that the citizens of Cambodia were 'delighted' about the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge government, which was obvious. [54]

In 1980, *Détente* ended when the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Saur Revolution (1979) was denounced by Carter in his State of the Union address as the 'most serious danger to peace since 1945', according to his National Security Adviser (Brzezinski). The USSR had backed the previous regime under Mohammed Daoud Khan, also supported by the *Parcham* faction of the Afghan communist party. However it was the competing *Khalq* faction that designed the coup and subsequently took over the country, with Taraki as both President and Prime Minister, while Amin became the Deputy Prime Minister of Afghanistan. In March 1979, Taraki attended a meeting with Kosygin, Gromyko (Foreign Minister), Ustinov (Defense Minister), and Ponomarev (head of the International Department of the Central Committee), to discuss the possibility of a Soviet intervention in Afghanistan to quell the opposition. Kosygin opposed the idea, telling the Afghan leader he had to gain popular support on its own, but in a closed meeting without the Premier, the Politburo unanimously backed a Soviet intervention. In October, Taraki then added to the existing turmoil when he plotted a failed assassination on Amin, who successfully engineered the President's own assassination a few days later. The USSR eventually invaded Afghanistan at the request of Khan in December while the United States were providing arms and financial aid to the *Mujahideen* movement in collaboration with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan (leaders of the guerilla included no other than Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden ...) in the hope of toppling the Moscow-friendly government. Eventually, Amin was killed by a KGB unit and the leader of the *Parcham* faction (Karmal), was chosen by the Soviet

leadership as his successor. [55]

In retaliation to the Soviet invasion, the United States stopped all grain export to the Soviet Union, and boycotted the 1980 Summer Olympics held in Moscow. The Soviet Union responded by persuading their athletes not to participate to the next Summer Olympics held in Los Angeles. In 1981, the election of Reagan further increased tensions when he promised a sharp rise in US defense spending and a more aggressively anti-Soviet foreign policy in general. At the time of Brezhnev's death, the USSR was still stuck in Afghanistan, and it would remain the case until 1989. [56]

In August 1980, the Soviet Politburo established a commission chaired by Suslov to examine the political crisis in Poland. The possibility of a military intervention was voiced but when the Eastern Bloc leaders met at the Kremlin later that year, Brezhnev had concluded that the USSR would intervene in the country's domestic matters only if asked to do so. Instead, martial law was initiated in December 1981 by the Jaruzelski Government. The ongoing Soviet-Afghan war coupled with the size of the opposition network were among the major reasons why the Politburo Commission did not opt for a direct military intervention in Poland. [57]

Andropov and Chernenko Transition Governments

Brezhnev died in November 1982 and was succeeded by Andropov who could rely on his KGB connections while also having the support of the military thanks to promises not to cut defense spending. For the first time in Soviet history, a leadership change occurred with no arrests or killings.

Andropov carried out a deep house-cleaning throughout the bureaucracy: more than 20% of the Soviet ministers and regional party first secretaries were replaced; the same fate was reserved for roughly one-third of the department heads within the Central Committee apparatus. But Andropov's ability to redistribute the cards at the top leadership level was limited by his poor health condition and the influence of Chernenko, his rival and longtime ally of Brezhnev, who had previously supervised staff matters in the Central Committee. Still, he was able to launch a massive anti-corruption campaign, made easier by the fact that he himself lived quite simply, contrary to former heads of government.

On the economic side, 1982 recorded the USSR's worst economic performance since World War II, with real GDP growth at almost zero percent but no significant reforms attempts were made under Andropov. [58]

In foreign affairs, Andropov kept the same stance as Brezhnev's regarding US-Soviet relations, which deteriorated dramatically after Reagan's March 1983 speech when he called the Soviet Union an 'evil empire'. Six months later, the atmosphere between the two governments became even more tense in the wake of the Soviet shootdown of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 which carried 269 people including a sitting US congressman (McDonald), and also over Reagan's stationing of intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Western Europe. This decision resulted in mass protests in France and West Germany, sometimes numbering 1 million or more people. Under the Reagan Doctrine, the US began undermining Soviet-supported governments by supplying arms to anti-communist resistance movements in these countries (Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola and so on) on the now too well-known motive of 'restoring democracy' ... [59]

Andropov died in February 1984 after disappearing from public view for several months. Nonetheless, he was influential in the promotion of Gorbachev through the Kremlin hierarchy during the past six years. Although Gorbachev served as a deputy to the general secretary throughout Andropov's illness, his time had not yet arrived when his mentor died.

At 71, Chernenko was not in better shape when he was chosen to replace his longtime rival, but his short time in office did bring a few notable policy changes. First, the anti-corruption campaign undertaken under his predecessor's supervision came to an end while repression of dissidents by the KGB increased. Major cases illustrating this policy include the Danchev and Senderov ones, respectively a broadcaster for Radio Moscow and a leader of an unofficial union of professional workers. The former referred to the Soviet troops in Afghanistan as 'invaders' and he was sent to a mental institution for several months after refusing to retract this statement; the latter was sentenced to seven years in a labor camp for denouncing work discrimination against Jews. [60]

Despite calling for renewed *détente* with the West, Chernenko achieved little progress towards closing the rift in East–West relations during his rule: the USSR boycotted the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles (in retaliation for the US-led boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow), the East German leader (Honecker) was prevented to visit West Germany in late summer that same year and the war in Afghanistan intensified to the point of being referred to as the Soviet Union's 'Vietnam War'. The two superpowers agreed to resume arms control talks in early 1985, however. [61]

Early Years of Gorbachev's Rule, 1985-1987



In March 1985, the Politburo elected Gorbachev to the position of General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, making him the first head of state not born a subject of the last tsar. Gorbachev started by appointing younger and more educated men to important official posts, such as Cherbrikov (KGB Chief), Ryzhkov (Secretary of Economics), Shevardnadze (Foreign Minister replacing the 75-year-old Gromyko), Zaikov (Secretary of Defense Industries) and Yeltsin (Secretary of Construction). The same strategy was implemented at province level (*oblasts*) where up to 40% of the first secretaries were replaced and the defense establishment was not spared either (the commanders of all 16 military districts had to leave their office). Overall, Gromyko's removal was the most unexpected move in this reshuffle of the Soviet elite, who was named Chairman of the Politburo instead. [62]

Regarding foreign policy, relations with the United States remained tense through 1985 reaching levels not seen since the Cuban Missile Crisis as Reagan increased US military spending to 7% of GDP, resulting in the Soviet Union increasing its own military spending to over 20% of GDP. In October, Gorbachev made his first visit to a non-communist country when he traveled to France. One month later, he met Reagan for the first time in Geneva. During the few weeks prior to the summit, major public relations campaign were launched against the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) both in the Soviet Union and the US. It was most widely known as the 'Star Wars' program, which consisted in a proposed missile defense system intended to protect the United States from attack by ballistic strategic nuclear weapons (intercontinental and submarine-launched ballistic missiles) through a combination of ground-based units and orbital deployment platforms. It replaced the previous Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) doctrine which stated that the threat of using nuclear weapons against the enemy in retaliation prevents the enemy's use of those same weapons. It depends on the completion of a nuclear triad, whereby a State achieves the ability of deploying its strategic nuclear arsenal by air (strategic bombers), land (intercontinental ballistic missiles, ICBMs) and water ways (submarine-launched ballistic missiles, SLBMs). Indeed, it significantly reduces the probability that an enemy could destroy all of a nation's nuclear forces in a one-strike attack. Game theory is behind this strategy, which consists in a form of Nash equilibrium where neither side, once armed, has any incentive to initiate a conflict or to disarm (there is a fundamental uncertainty about the other player's motives and the perspective of nuclear annihilation certainly qualifies as a 'negative payoff' ...). When the summit finally took place, the two leaders issued a joint communique stating that nuclear war could not be won by either side and must therefore never be allowed to happen, despite Reagan's refusal to abandon the SDI. [63]

Contrary to the Chinese Way (economic liberalization with preservation of political system), Gorbachev decided to combine political and economic liberalization reforms (respectively the *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* policies).

In 1987, the Law on State Enterprise was enacted, allowing state enterprises to determine output levels based on demand and declaring them 'self-financing'. However, the government kept control over the means of production, even if the law formally shifted control over enterprise operations from ministries to elected workers' collectives.

Next year, the Law on Cooperatives permitted private ownership of businesses in the manufacturing, services, and foreign-trade sectors for the first time since Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) was abolished sixty years ago. Most importantly, foreigners were now able to invest in the USSR in the form of joint ventures with Soviet ministries, state enterprises, and cooperatives thereby ending the government's monopoly on foreign trade. Under the terms of the revised Joint Venture Law (originally enacted in 1987), the Soviet partner supplied labor and infrastructure while the foreign one supplied capital, technology and management skills. [64]

Implosion of the USSR

Although the *Perestroika* did bring some welcome and significant changes to the Soviet economy, it was not sufficient to catch up years of underperformance. Besides, most government controls over the means of production and price levels remained, as did the ruble's inconvertibility. By 1988, government expenditures rose sharply as an increasing number of unprofitable enterprises needed state support and consumer price subsidies continued, thereby creating a hidden inflation phenomenon. Costs related to the

maintenance of superpower status (military, space program, subsidies to client states) did not help either. On the other hand, federal tax revenues declined mainly because local governments withheld tax revenues from the central government due to growing regional autonomy and the open development of a black market to deal with supply shortages also undermined the official economy. [65]

Lacking more and more financial resources, the USSR thus began looking for a withdrawal route in Afghanistan. That same year, the Geneva Accords were signed between Afghanistan and Pakistan with the two superpowers as guarantors. They included a timetable for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, which was completed in early 1989.

Even so, the Pakistani secret services (ISI) continued to support the *Mujahideen* against the communist government of Afghanistan and by 1992, the latter collapsed. Meanwhile, Reagan actively hindered the USSR's ability to sell natural gas to Europe and its government worked to keep gas prices low, which further starved the Soviet Union of foreign capital. [66]

Initially intended as a tool to bolster the ailing Soviet Union, the *Glasnost* soon led to unintended consequences as well.

Increased freedom of speech and the press enabled the media to expose long-denied severe economic and social problems, including poor housing, corruption, outdated production facilities, pollution or alcoholism. Also for the first time, the crimes committed by Stalin were covered in the news. Public discontent about the regime was further fueled in a major way by the attempted cover-up of the Chernobyl disaster (1986) and the ongoing war in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, nationalism rose within the USSR's constituent republics and the resulting ethnic tensions added to the discredit of the ideal of a unified Soviet people. For example, in 1988 the government of Nagorno-Karabakh (a predominantly Armenian region in the Azerbaijan republic) passed a resolution calling for unification with Armenia. The Soviet television reported the ensuing violence against local Azerbaijanis, which in return led to a slaughter of Armenians in Sumgayit (near Baku).

By 1989, Moscow had dropped the Brezhnev Doctrine, switching to a non-intervention policy regarding the internal affairs of its Warsaw Pact allies, nicknamed the Sinatra Doctrine by the Gorbachev government in allusion to the song 'My Way'. Thanks to free elections made possible by the Glasnost policy, each of the satellite states gradually saw their communist governments fall except in Romania, where a violent uprising led to the murder of President Ceaușescu, after he ordered his security forces to fire on anti-government demonstrators in Timișoara. Grachev (Deputy Head of the Intelligence Department of the Central Committee) explained the downfall of the USSR by the blatant change in political atmosphere: 'Gorbachev actually put the sort of final blow to the resistance of the Soviet Union by killing the fear of the people. It was still that this country was governed and kept together, as a structure, as a government structure, by the fear from Stalinist times.' [67]

Eventually, the dissolution of the USSR was a process of systematic disintegration occurring in the economic, political and social spheres.

During the last year of the USSR, the tension between the Russian Republic and the Soviet

Union authorities came to be personified in the bitter power struggle between Gorbachev and Yeltsin, who was elected chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet in May 1990 then President of the Russian Federation in the first presidential election which took place the next year. In late August 1991, a coup against Gorbachev was attempted by senior Soviet officials, including Yanayev (Vice-President), Pavlov (Prime Minister), Kryuchkov (KGB chief) and Yazov (Defense Minister). The coup collapsed in three days due to wide popular opposition but the Russian government still took over most of the Soviet Union government institutions on its territory. Indeed, a few days later Gorbachev dissolved the Central Committee, resigned as the party's general secretary, and dissolved all party units in the government. Moreover, by December 1991 the shortages had resulted in the introduction of food rationing in Moscow and Saint Petersburg for the first time since World War II: disintegration of the Union looked inevitable. [68]

On December 8th, 1991 the Belavezha Accords were signed by Yeltsin, Kravchuk (President of Ukraine) and Shushkevich (Chairman of the Belarusian parliament). They declared the USSR effectively dissolved and established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) instead, using Article 72 of the 1977 Soviet Constitution which defines Soviet republics' right to secede freely from the Union. Thirteen days later, representatives of 11 of the 12 former republics (all except Georgia) signed the Alma-Ata Protocol, thereby confirming the dissolution of the USSR and formally establishing the CIS. It also authorized Russia to assume the Soviet Union's UN membership, including its permanent seat on the Security Council. On December 25th, 1991 the resignation of Gorbachev resulted in the official abolition of the Soviet Union and independence of the USSR's republics being recognized as sovereign nation-states by the international community. [69]

Conclusion

The density of Soviet history makes it hard to sum up in a few lines. Still, a few long-period patterns should be observed.

Once again, autocratic rule, lethargic bureaucracy, ethnic diversity and poor economic performances certainly have proved to form an explosive mix. On the economic side, it should be noted that standards of living reached their highest levels in the USSR when, if not a sort of common ground, at least a hybrid regime between communism and capitalism was sought after during Lenin's NEP, the 'Kosygin reform' and Gorbachev's *Perestroika*. As early as 1976, French historian Emmanuel Todd forecasted the implosion of the Soviet Union, mainly as a consequence of the complete disorganization and decline of the industrial complex which led to a rise in infant mortality that was soon to be denounced (among other problems) by educated masses from the Western part of the USSR. [70]

It would be wrong, however, to consider that the Soviet experience failed *only* due to internal reasons. The arms race, oil shocks and support to anti-communist regimes provided by the United States and their allies also played a significant part in the collapse of America's last rival for world domination. These aspects have been covered extensively by many respected authors, including William Engdhal and Noam Chomsky, with the former focusing on energy-related matters and the latter on the analysis of western mass media in general and their stance on "unfriendly" regimes in particular.

Regarding current affairs, the absence of open ideological confrontation and direct military competition between the US and China excludes the latter from deserving a status similar to

the former USSR's. The next and final part of this series will cover developments in post-Soviet Russia, from the Shock Therapy of Yeltsin's years to the present. In this perspective, it would probably be wiser to wait for the end of Putin's presidency to propose a global analysis of the reconstruction period that began in 1999 in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis.

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