

Reform, Coup and Collapse: The End of the Soviet State

By Professor Archie Brown

Setting the scene

The speed with which the Soviet system was transformed and the Soviet state disintegrated took almost everyone by surprise. The system appeared impervious to fundamental change during the years Leonid Brezhnev headed the Politburo (1964-82). And even the most disaffected nationalities in the Soviet Union - a description that fitted the Baltic peoples of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - did not in their wildest dreams believe, when Mikhail Gorbachev succeeded Konstantin Chernenko as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985, that within less than seven years they would be living in independent states.

The dramatic events that followed the change of leadership in 1985, culminating in the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of December 1991, had longer-term sources, but these did not determine the form or the timing of the system's transformation. Russia, which occupied three-quarters of the territory of the former Soviet Union, was a different society on the eve of Chernenko's death from what it had been at the time of Joseph Stalin's death just 32 years earlier. In the meanwhile the general level of education had risen, millions more people had entered higher education, and there was greater (though still restricted) knowledge of the outside world. Well-educated professionals had become a significant social group and they were ready to embrace the cultural liberalisation introduced early in the Gorbachev era.

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As well as the pull of social change there was the push of policy failure. The rate of economic growth in the Soviet Union had been in long-term decline from the 1950s to the early 1980s. There was lower life expectancy, especially among adult males (linked by many observers to excessive alcohol consumption), and higher infant mortality rates. Yet such factors do not on their own explain the systemic change of the second half of the 1980s or the collapse of the Soviet state. Many an inefficient state has been able to muddle through or 'muddle down' over decades. Indeed, on these particular socio-economic indicators, post-Soviet Russia has a worse record than the late Soviet period.

Transformations begin

The Soviet Union on the eve of Gorbachev's *perestroika* (reconstruction) had serious political and economic problems. Technologically, it was falling behind not only Western countries but also the newly industrialised countries of Asia. Its foreign policy evinced a declining capacity to win friends and influence people. Yet there was no political instability within the country, no

unrest, and no crisis. This was not a case of economic and political crisis producing liberalisation and democratisation. Rather, it was liberalisation and democratisation that brought the regime to crisis point.

There were five interconnected transformations in the last years of the Soviet Union which are too often conflated into one 'collapse' or 'implosion'. It is especially important to distinguish between the dismantling of the communist system and the disintegration of the Soviet state, for the former preceded the latter by between two and three years. The five great transformations were as follows.

1) The opening up of the political system

Gorbachev began with liberalisation, but by 1988 he was turning to democratisation. He had used the term 'democratisation' even before he became General Secretary, but the decisive turning-point was when he got the 19th Conference of the Communist Party in the summer of 1988 to agree to hold contested elections for a new legislature to be called the Congress of People's Deputies. The elections duly took place the following spring and resulted in defeats for a number of important party officials and victories for some forthright critics of the Communist Party leadership.

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The critics included Boris Yeltsin, who, though still formally a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, had broken with the hierarchy as early as the autumn of 1987 and had become a thorn in their flesh. It was the new institution of competitive elections which, however, enabled him to launch his political comeback. By 1989 the *glasnost* (openness or transparency) that Gorbachev had proclaimed from the time he became Communist Party and national leader had evolved into freedom of speech and, increasingly, freedom of publication. Long-banned works, such as those of George Orwell and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, were published in huge print-runs while the Soviet Union was still in existence.

Changes in Policy

2) The breakdown of the 'command economy'

The Soviet economic system had been highly centralised and was based on five-year plans. In practice, the plans could be modified but decisions even on how many tons of nails or pairs of shoes would be produced were taken in ministries in Moscow and co-ordinated by the State Planning Committee (Gosplan) rather than depending on market forces. Gorbachev was in favour of a large measure of marketisation, though he delayed

freeing prices. He was aware that this would lead to sharp price rises and it was left to Boris Yeltsin, as president of Russia, to back Yegor Gaidar in taking that step in January 1992.

The Soviet economy was in limbo in the last two years of the Soviet Union's existence - no longer a command economy but not yet a market system. Significant reforms, such as permitting individual enterprise (1986), devolving more powers to factories (1987), and legalising co-operatives (1988), which were to become thinly disguised private enterprises, had undermined the old institutional structures and produced unintended consequences, but no viable alternative economic system had been put in their place.

3) The end of the Cold War

Changes in foreign and domestic policy were closely interlinked in the second half of the 1980s. Gorbachev pursued a concessionary foreign policy on the basis of what was called the 'new political thinking'. The ideas were certainly new in the Soviet context and included the belief that the world had become interdependent, that there were universal interests and values that should prevail over class interests and the old East-West divide, and that all countries had the right to decide for themselves the nature of their political and economic systems.

4) The abandonment of communist regimes in Eastern Europe

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That last 'right to choose' was taken at face value by the peoples of East-Central Europe in 1989 as one country in the region after another cast aside its communist rulers and moved out of the Soviet camp. While the new governments' rejection of even the reformed Soviet Union was more than Gorbachev had bargained for, he refused to countenance use of force to prevent what critics at home saw as the loss of everything the Soviet Union had gained as a result of the Second World War (in which it lost 27 million of its own citizens).

Not a shot was fired by a Soviet soldier as the Central and East Europeans took their countries' destinies into their own hands. In Western capitals it had been an axiom prior to Gorbachev's coming to power that Soviet control over Eastern Europe was non-negotiable and that the most that could be achieved would be an amelioration of oppressive regimes.

Empire disintegrates

5) *The break-up of the Soviet Union*

When Poles, Czechs, Hungarians and others successfully claimed independent statehood, this had a destabilising effect within the Soviet Union itself. The expectations of, again most notably, Lithuanians, Estonians and Latvians were enormously enhanced by what they saw happening in the 'outer empire' and they began to believe that they could remove themselves from the 'inner empire'. In truth, a democratised Soviet Union was incompatible with denial of the Baltic states' independence for, to the extent that those Soviet republics became democratic, their opposition to remaining in a political entity whose centre was Moscow would become increasingly evident. Yet, it was not preordained that the entire Soviet Union would break up.

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A major factor in producing its dissolution was Boris Yeltsin's playing of the Russian card against the Union. Since Russia and Russians had long dominated the Soviet state, there was something surprising about a Russian leader (Yeltsin was Chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet from 1990 and elected President of Russia in June 1991) demanding Russian 'sovereignty' from the Union in 1990 and full 'independence' in 1991. Gorbachev and his remaining supporters in the leadership of the federal government had negotiated a new Union Treaty between the spring and summer of 1991, designed to keep a majority of republics, including Russia, within a much looser federation in which far greater powers than hitherto were to be devolved from the centre to the republics.

For conservative communists in the party apparatus, the military and the KGB, this was the last straw and they mounted a coup in August 1991 which began on the 18th with their putting Gorbachev under house arrest in his holiday home on the Crimean coast, and ended on the 22nd. The *putschists* themselves had been affected by the changes of the preceding years and they showed lack of resolution when faced by defiance from Yeltsin and thousands of Russian citizens who surrounded the parliament building from which Yeltsin was still able to communicate with the outside world. Moreover, by taking action just two months after Yeltsin had been popularly elected, their claims to be speaking on behalf of the people as a whole rang hollow.

End of the Union

The coup failed for many reasons, among them divisions within the military and the KGB. Within a few days the principal *putschists* were under arrest. Gorbachev, who had been elected President of the Soviet Union in March 1990, not by the citizenry as a whole but indirectly by the Congress of People's Deputies, was enormously weakened by the revolt against him by people he had appointed to high office. Yeltsin wasted no time in taking advantage of his new position of strength. Conscious of the fact that with no Union there would be no Gorbachev in the Kremlin, he proceeded to wind up the USSR in conjunction with the leaders of the two other Slavic republics of Belarus and Ukraine. On 25 December 1991 the red flag was lowered from the Kremlin and by the end of the month the Soviet Union had passed into history. Fifteen new states stood where one mighty superpower had recently held sway.

Neither the system nor the Union had to disappear in this particular way. Before liberalisation and democratisation from above, only a handful of dissidents dared voice their grievances and demands in public. A different leader from Gorbachev might have resorted to old-style coercion the moment he saw that reform was leading to loss of control. A different leader from Yeltsin might have strived to preserve the boundaries of a 'greater Russia' rather than accept borders that had never, historically, been those of his country and which, moreover, meant that 25 million Russians found themselves all of a sudden living 'abroad'. Each of the five great transformations interacted with and influenced the others.

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But the sequence was that the Soviet Union was first reformed, then transformed, and then disintegrated all within the space of six-and-a-half years. It had ceased to be a communist system in any meaningful sense from the time of the state-wide contested elections of the spring of 1989. Inside the Communist Party, vigorous public debate had replaced 'democratic centralism'. Moreover, the basic principle of the party's 'leading role' within the political system and society was being challenged from all sides as new political organisations sprang up. In March 1990 the Communist Party's monopoly of power was removed from the Soviet Constitution, formal recognition of what had been the reality on the ground for the past year.

Seldom, if ever, has a highly authoritarian political system, deploying military means sufficient to destroy life on earth, been dismantled so peacefully. Never has an empire disintegrated with so little bloodshed. Although huge difficulties remained for the successor states, the way Soviet communism came to an end was one of the great success stories of 20th century politics.

Books

The Gorbachev Factor by Archie Brown (Oxford University Press, 1996)

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About the author

Archie Brown is Professor of Politics at Oxford University and a Fellow of St Antony's College. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1991 and currently chairs its Political Studies Section. His recent books include *The Gorbachev Factor* (1996), *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century* (co-editor, 1999) and *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader* (editor, 2001).

The last Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev initiated reforms that ultimately led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Here are some of the key moments

• The Soviet-Afghan war ends in May 1988, signalled warming relations between America and the USSR. Photograph: Robert Nickelsberg/Getty Images. Facebook. Twitter. Pinterest.

• Gorbachev's reforms fail to revive the economy and menial jobs are found to keep people employed. Photograph: Melanie Stetson Freeman/Christian Science Monitor/Getty. Facebook. Twitter. Pinterest.

• Rallies in support of Gorbachev and against the coup plotters, the State Committee on the State of Emergency (known as the Gang of Eight), are held across Russia, including in Leningrad. Photograph: Alexander Demianchuk/Reuters. Facebook.

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• KGB head office, Lubyanka, Moscow

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• The collapse of the coup led to the demise of Soviet communism, but the CPSU's influence had been dwindling since at least the beginning of Gorbachev's reform regime in 1985. The coup's failure simply punctuated this decline by showcasing the hollow threat that the once-dominant Soviet apparatus had become. The CPSU now reaped a harvest of bitterness and hatred for its failure to produce a modern dynamic state and society. The remarkable economic decline of the Soviet Union during the 1980s had exacerbated ethnic tensions and promoted regionalism and nationalism.