The Disintegration of the Soviet Union and the End of the Cold War

At its disintegration in 1991, the Soviet Union had existed for seven decades, comprised about a sixth of our globe’s surface, and was populated by approximately 285 million inhabitants. The union officially consisted of 15 republics, including over 90 nationalities and 110 languages. In reality, its largest republic always dominated the state on political, economic and cultural levels, making “Russia” a widely used synonym for the “USSR”. In fact, Russia’s influence reached even beyond the USSR, controlling various satellite states like Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia or Bulgaria. When Communist Russia finally stumbled in her race with the west, the whole eastern block crumbled. The downfall of this unofficial empire not only ended the Cold War, but it also opened the door for various political developments both promising and alarming, which still shape our current world. Though this epoch-making event looked like a sudden upheaval at that time, it really was the result of many domestic problems, which had been growing continually but which propaganda had long kept from the public consciousness.

**Domestic problems in the Eastern Bloc**

The most influential stumbling block was certainly the unbalanced economic development. Though the Soviet economy had managed to recover rapidly from World War II, this industrial revival was chiefly based on heavy industry and the export of resources like coal and oil. The income from these sales was mainly invested in reconstructing the military. As tensions with the western allies soon grew, re-arming remained high on the political agenda. This one-sided economic orientation meant that the production of consumer goods quickly lagged, leading to far-reaching economic and social problems: Firstly, the state ran up a large budget deficit. As there were not enough consumer goods for sale, the state logically could not collect enough value-added tax to pay for its infrastructure and constant re-armament. In order to decrease the deficit, the few consumer goods which were able to compete on the international market were exported. For example, shoes for the West German brand “Salamander” were produced in East German Erfurt, the nationally-owned factory “Trikotex” produced underwear for West Germany’s quality brand “Schiesser” and Ikea had shelves produced in both Poland and the GDR. But such exports reduced the availability of consumer goods in the Eastern Bloc even more, leaving the population with some buying power but not much to buy. This situation was aggravated by structural deficits of the planned economy. As virtually all factories were state-owned in this system, decisions about what to produce and how to produce it were often based on politics rather than on popular demand. Even when the USSR and her satellites finally realised the lack of consumer goods, their huge systems proved incapable of reacting quickly and flexibly enough. Though the USSR issued higher quotas for the production of consumer goods in her last Five Year Plan*, she could not turn up and coordinate enough machinery, materials and specialists in these fields immediately. The attempts of the factories to still meet the mandatory quotas often then took on strange forms. If, for example, textile factories and seamstresses were plentiful but the raw material was not, it happened that the material was “stretched” by simply producing small sizes only. Though the demanded total number was finally available, you still were not able to find a pair of size 9 shoes or size L trousers. In more extreme cases, the political order to produce consumer goods remained so unspecified that explosives
plants started producing fly swatters. This way, propaganda could claim great increases in productivity for the whole light industry without really improving the people’s material needs. The growing gap between ideological phrases and the real standard of living made the population increasingly discontented with their government. In regions bordering western countries, where people could easily compare their dire situation to the availability of ample products advertised in western radio and television, the flaws of their own system became even more obvious to the population.

However, this did not lead to protests for a long time because open criticism was held back systematically. From harsh censorship of the press up to internment in Siberian labour camps the governments had much in store to keep their people toeing party line. Even if some countries of the Eastern Bloc had temporarily liberalised their economic and political systems, such cases must be regarded as exceptions on the whole. For example, nationwide strikes had finally led to the official registration of the free trade union association “Solidarity”* in Poland in 1980. But as soon as the workers had lifted their strike due to this concession, the Polish Central Committee declared the country to be in a state of emergency – a state allowing the unfounded prohibition of all political groups other than the Polish Workers Party*. Under such conditions, most people in the Eastern Bloc could only express their opposition by withdrawing from political life. Indirectly, people also started to withdraw from work life as their poor pay would not buy them their desired goods anyway. Though they had to turn up at their jobs, their attitude to work did not seem to matter because wages did not depend on performance. On the contrary, consistently poor achievement would not make you redundant either because unemployment officially did not exist in communism. Of course, such lack of professional incentives often resulted in slow work and shoddy workmanship which, in turn, only magnified the shortage of available end products. With vodka being one of the few products their countries could offer and they could afford, alcohol became many workers’ last resort. As drunkenness at work could generally not be punished with dismissal, it started to spread, lowering the overall work morale even more. Thus, the people’s silent protest against their unsatisfactory living conditions only worsened their own situation in the end. With empty shelves and growing queues in the shops, this downhill spiral did not remain a secret to the Communist Party’s Central Committee. Though rationing scarce products helped to temporarily balance the most severe shortages, it was clear to many of its members that thorough reforms were unavoidable in the long run. But again, the production of consumer goods did not make it to the top of their agenda as resurging international tensions had put the focus back on foreign policy since the late seventies.

**Apparent Crises: Afghanistan and Tschernobyl**

In loose adherence to the Brezhnev Doctrine*, the Soviet Union had invaded her southern neighbour Afghanistan in 1979. In this formerly non-aligned country*, the Communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan* (PDPA) had only assumed power in a military coup the previous year. But the PDPA had immediately come under pressure as its drastic reform programmes greatly concerned large sections of the population. Muslim men opposed the emancipation of women, big landowners defied collectivization, and adherents of the toppled republic feared political purges. To quell such sources of resistance, Afghanistan’s new government asked the Soviets for assistance and on 24th December 1979 they sent their 40th army to install Babrak Kamal* as puppet president. To the USSR, control of
the troubled area seemed vital in order to keep Afghanistan’s powerful Muslim nationalists from influencing the Muslim groups in her own southern republics like Uzbekistan or Tajikistan. But defeating Afghanistan’s mujahedin* proved much more difficult than expected. Though the USSR made use of her technical superiority by carpet bombing vast regions of the country, she could not extinguish resistance in the inaccessible mountain regions. This procedure became even more futile since the mujahedin got fitted out with American Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. Such equipment also revealed that the conflict had turned into a new proxy war, which has often been compared to Vietnam – just with reversed roles. This time, the USA stayed in the background while the Soviet troops got bogged down in a wearing counter-insurgency. The campaign not only put additional strains on the USSR’s weak financial situation, it also had severe repercussions on her people’s self-esteem. After they had been indoctrinated to renounce personal luxury in favour of a strong army, this army ultimately proved incapable of beating an enemy originally described as a bunch of backward rebels.

During this military campaign, another event led to an open questioning of the USSR’s position as a technological superpower. On 26th April 1986, an explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant contaminated large regions of western Europe. Though Soviet propaganda tried to play down the catastrophe at first, it finally had to admit its full scale after measuring instruments at foreign nuclear plants as far away as Sweden had detected extremely high levels of radiation. Pressed by international criticism, the USSR had to allow relatively open investigations of the catastrophe. This insight into their country’s disastrous crisis management certainly opened the people’s eyes for the structural inefficiency and mercilessness of the Soviet system. Fire fighters were sacrificed to get the burning reactor under control and “liquidators”, soldiers from throughout the USSR, were sent in to seal off the reactor with concrete. People from the nearby city of Pripyat were not evacuated until weeks after the catastrophe. And last but not least, several scientists claimed that the accident might have been prevented from the start if the plant had been built according to western standards. Additionally, the follow-up costs for relocations and medical treatments increased the already overstretched state deficit by yet another 20 billion rubles. Both, the loss of trust and the financial burden caused by the Chernobyl disaster convinced the new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to speed up his reforms.

Gorbachev’s Attempts to reform: Perestroika and Glasnost

Advanced in years and in a weak state of health, Gorbachev’s predecessors Yuri Andropov* and Konstantin Chernenko* had only been General Secretaries of the Communist Party for fifteen and thirteen months respectively, time spans too short for any serious changes. Their elections have therefore been regarded as an illustration of the general indecision of the Politburo in the early eighties. At Brezhnev’s death in November 1982, it was obvious to the committee that his continued increasing of the military budget would sooner or later lead to a dead end and his economic policy has posthumously been termed the “Brezhnevian Stagnation”*. However, with no alternative strategy at hand, electing Andropov and Chernenko was probably meant to buy time until a clear way out of the crisis was in sight. When the latter died on 10th March 1985, it had become unmistakably clear that only radical reforms would stop the downward trend. The election of Mikhail Gorbachev pointed the way ahead. Being the youngest comrade of the Politburo Gorbachev, at 54, was not only assumed to stay in office for a long time but also to fill this long term of office with thorough reforms as his comparably liberal
attitude had been visible throughout his previous career. For example, Gorbachev had restructured the kolkhozes of his home region when he was head of the agricultural department there in the 1960s. In the course of this reorganisation, one of his key steps was to allow larger private plots, thus handing over slightly more personal responsibility to the individual farmers. As expected, Gorbachev should stay true to this basic concept of higher personal incentives and responsibilities once he became Secretary General.

Heading the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1986, the new leader officially propagated his agenda by introducing the principles of Perestroika*, Demokratizatsiya* and Glasnost*. Perestroika, or ‘restructuring’, aimed at pushing the USSR’s economy by modestly shifting it towards market standards. To increase efficiency, workers should be allowed to elect their own factory managers instead of having them sent from Moscow, for example. Additionally, founding some smaller private businesses was to be permitted. But Gorbachev was aware that those steps would only function in combination with Glasnost, or ‘openness’, and some democratization. If workers were not allowed to talk openly, for example, it would remain impossible to develop their opinion on talented new leaders. And as long as party alignment was more important than professional qualifications, it would remain impossible to fill managerial positions with competent applicants. Also, if the public was not allowed to express their economic wishes more freely, it would not be possible for small private businesses to fulfill them. Consequently, open acclaim of the class enemy’s consumer goods had to be endured by the party to some degree. For without such new openness, the urgently needed economic reforms would be doomed from the start. Ironically, the means of Glasnost and Demokratizatsiya turned out to be much more successful than just achieving their original end of reviving the economy for Gorbachev would soon be unable to control the forces he had unleashed.

As a logical consequence of tolerating open criticism, Gorbachev went on to allow competitive elections for the Congress of People’s Deputies* in 1988. In this new form of a bicameral parliament, one third of the 2250 seats would still be reserved for the CPSU, but the remaining 1500 seats would also be open to candidates not promoted by the party. Half of the seats would be elected through the Soviet of the Union, in which one deputy represented 300,000 citizens. The other 750 seats were to be filled by the Soviet of Nationalities, sending representatives from each of the single republics and autonomous areas of the USSR. Though this constitutional reform might have arisen from his democratic convictions, it was certainly also a tactical decision of the General Secretary. As hard-liners were regularly resisting his reforms, Gorbachev hoped to lower this aged party elite’s influence by public vote, expecting the voters to reward him for his initiated changes. The result of this strategy proved to be ambiguous, however. On the one hand, Gorbachev’s scheme was successful as he was elected chairman of the new institution. The CPSU gained about 80% of the votes without returning some of its most conservative party members at the same time, opening the way for many of Gorbachev’s reforms. On the other hand, the new institution also gave a platform to critics of the system in general and of Mikhail Gorbachev in particular.

Failing Reforms and the Disintegration of the USSR

The most prominent among these critics was Boris Yeltsin*. Formerly a member of the Politburo himself, Yeltsin had lost his position when he attacked Gorbachev’s Perestroika for not being drastic
enough. But in the first elections to the Congress of People’s Deputies, he won the Moscow constituency by almost 90% and went on to become the central figure of the first legal opposition in Soviet history, the Inter-Regional Deputies’ Group*. Yeltsin’s success clearly indicates that many people were unhappy with the slow pace and the limited effects of the president’s economic reforms. For example, Gorbachev’s attempt to restore the work ethic by lowering state-controlled output of alcohol not only made him seem like a spoilsport but also had the additional negative side-effect of reducing a source of much needed state taxes. Other factors contributing to the ever-rising state deficit were beyond Gorbachev’s control, however. President Reagan’s* Strategic Defence Initiative* was officially meant to develop a system of satellites and rockets shielding the US from possible Soviet attack. But it has also repeatedly been argued that the programme was mainly aimed at bankrupting the USSR. This initiative made the USSR appear to be at a severe disadvantage in the arms race as she seemed now unable to retaliate after an American attack. Although such an attack was not very probable, not with the series of Summit Talks* between Reagan and Gorbachev in 1984, 1986 and 1987, Reagan’s strict adherence to SDI was one crucial reason for the 1986 Reykjavik Summit to end without any results.

Even though the Washington Summit one year later saw the two presidents finally sign the INF-Treaty*, which removed conventional and atomic mid-range rockets, the American adherence to SDI still caused much suspicion within the USSR. Although Gorbachev abstained from significantly raising the military budget to initiate a comparable Soviet programme, he was unable to convince his generals to agree to substantial cuts in Soviet military spending which would have been necessary to set his budget straight. The USA may also have used another approach to put further pressure on the Soviet economy. It has been suggested that the USA pushed her ally Saudi Arabia to lower her oil prices. Depending on US armaments, the Saudis might have had to agree to such a demand – even if it diminished their income severely. With lower Saudi oil prices, the USSR had to lower her own oil prices as well to stay competitive on the world market. However, as the export of this raw material had been the Soviet Union’s main source of hard currency, she became increasingly unable to meet her rising debt payments. Even though the Soviets had begun to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan in 1987, the accompanying savings proved insufficient.

In this tight economic situation, Gorbachev’s budget and indeed his whole political agenda were strained even further by ethnic conflicts erupting throughout the Soviet Union. Meant to initiate an inventory of economic problems in the first place, the people had quickly come to apply the idea of Glasnost to other spheres of life as well. The new openness had thus revealed ethnic frictions which had been suppressed by Moscow’s iron fist for the previous seven decades. For example, Armenia and Azerbaijan had long quarrelled about the Karabagh region, situated between the two Soviet republics. Though this region was mainly populated by Christian Armenians, its education system was dominated by Muslim Azerbaijanis. Of course, as long as religion was ideologically condemned in the Soviet Union, this was not allowed to be a problem. But with Glasnost leading towards freedom of worship and with Gorbachev visiting the Vatican in 1989, religious differences soon resurfaced. Unwilling to take sides in this conflict and afraid to set a precedent for territorial claims by other nationalities, Gorbachev had denied to re-draw the boundaries of the two Soviet republics. Disappointed by this decision, both sides took action themselves, and after a series of skirmishes, Gorbachev was finally forced to send in troops in 1990. A comparable situation arose in Uzbekistan, where different Muslim
factions clashed. At the Baltic coast, Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians eventually saw their chance to shake off despised Russian occupation, which was still a consequence of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact*. Though all their different grievances were hardly of the new leader’s own making, the different Soviet Republics used his glasnost to finally give vent to them.

Gorbachev attempted to solve those multiple crises with a twofold strategy: Though he often immediately dispatched troops to quell the protests, he tried to pursue his reforms with even more determination. In early February 1990, he convinced the Central Committee to delete article 6 of the constitution, which had established the Communist Party as the “leading and guiding force of the Soviet society and the nucleus of its political system, of all state organisations and public organisations.”¹

Later that year, the people’s deputies approved of a constitutional amendment, granting the individual republics financial and administrative sovereignty while key areas like foreign trade, foreign policy and defence were to remain with Gorbachev, the first president of this re-structured union. But the prospect of substantially more freedoms for the republics and of a stout reformer as the new head of state made the remaining hard-liners rebel. An emergency committee, led by vice-president Janajew* and supported by the KGB and broad circles of the military, used Gorbachev’s summer holiday at the Crimea for a coup d’état. The army quickly blockaded central government buildings in Moscow and a spokesperson of the emergency committee simply declared the deposition of the president. However, used to glasnost and craving for new freedoms, many people did not simply endure such declarations from the top any longer. Instead, led by Boris Yeltsin, the population of Moscow went on general strike and the putsch quickly failed. Nevertheless, the episode proved that Gorbachev’s plans for the Soviet Union were no longer feasible.

Though Yeltsin had momentarily assisted Gorbachev, and though the two men originally shared the general conviction that changes were necessary, they had long chosen different approaches to reforms and the masses now seemed to follow Yeltsin’s. Having officially resigned from the Communist Party in 1990, Yeltsin saw the necessity to crush old party elites; their attempted coup seemed to support that his approach was the correct one. As president of the Russian Soviet Republic, Yeltsin also pledged for even more independence of the individual nationalities. Both these aims, less influence for the Communists and more influence for the republics, were supported by the electorate as seen in the official results of the first free elections in the Soviet Union: The Communist Party suffered a massive loss of votes and was even voted out of office in the Baltic republics and Armenia while nationalists and reformers gained seats throughout the Union. To a pragmatist like Yeltsin, such results must have foreshadowed the disintegration of the USSR. This development would automatically put the president of the biggest republic into a leading position when it came to re-shaping Eastern Europe and Yeltsin was quick to take this chance. On the eve of its 74th anniversary, Yeltsin banned the Communist Party. Then he secretly discussed the creation of a new – comparably loose – confederation with the Belarusian and Ukrainian presidents. This Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)* was quickly joined by most former Soviet republics and was officially proclaimed in the Treaty of Alma Ata* on 21st December 1991, a treaty simultaneously marking the end of the USSR. Thus stripped of his powers, Gorbachev stepped down four days later.

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¹ (http://www.constitution.org/cons/ussr77.txt)