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EUH 5579
Essay
July 17, 2004

Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?

Prior to September 11th, 2001, one of the most dramatic world-shaping events of this generation was the fall of the Soviet Union. Whereas, however, the September 11th attacks on America and the ensuing ramifications can be explained by a possible “bubbling over” of militant Islamic animosity towards Western culture, defining why the Soviet Union collapsed is not so easily defined.

In explaining why the government of one of the world’s largest nations ceased to exist, we must consider the roles of several aspects of government (ideology, history, economics, social views, military, etc.) and their impacts on the downfall of the Soviet Union. This essay will attempt to explain the fall of the Soviet Union by showing why a confused ideology led to a lack of economic/ social incentives which led to low/ dropping morale which, following a pattern of Russian historical impatience, led to rash attempts at correction. These rapid “shocks” to the Soviet socio-economic system led to lower morale and finally, to a disbelief in the system by the populace, causing the government to falter.

Looking back, it may be conceivable that the idea of a “Soviet Union” began its demise in late 1917 when the Menshevik party and the right-leaning Social Revolutionaries (SRs) failed to stop the Bolshevik rise to power, therefore “ceding” the future of the communist ideal to Lenin and his followers. According to Dziwanowski, “the victory of the Bolsheviks in Russia has proved to be one of the most decisive events of the twentieth century” (1, 87).

The Bolshevik seizure of power becomes even more important because Lenin and his party believed in an “accelerated Communism” ideologically different from the patient, more Marxist-based beliefs of the Mensheviks (1, 39). Instead of waiting for the proletariat to “win the battle of democracy” and to “wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie” (2, 375), Lenin believed a “tight, hierarchically organized party composed of dedicated people devoted body and soul to the task of a proletarian revolution” could create a “Soviet Union” (1, 37).

Unfortunately, Lenin’s first attempts at forcing “top-down” Communism (War Communism) foreshadowed other Soviet societal reforms and led to massive shocks in the former-Tsarist society, causing maladies such as nationwide starvation and lack of fuel (1, 120). These conditions in turn, instead of being corrected slowly, caused an extreme government reaction (the New Economic Policy), continuing a pattern seen often in Russian history, from Alexander II’s reforms in the 1860s to Mikhail Gorbachev’s reactions to perestroika and glasnost in the 1980s.

In addition to the failure of War Communism, continued poor economic decisions by Soviet leaders in the name of their “Communist” ideology ravaged the future of the nation. Granted, Stalin’s emphasis on heavy industry during his “5 year plans” contributed greatly to the defeat of the Nazis in World War II, but it was the continued failure of the Soviet leadership to adopt a peacetime consumer-based economy that had a large role in the failure of the Soviet Union. According to Gill, the continuing lack of consumer goods led to “popular disillusionment with the system as it appeared to be failing to keep the promises it made and to satisfy popular expectations” (3, 74).

To further examine the Soviet Union economically is to see a major reason why it did not achieve long-term success. According to William Easterly, Senior Fellow at the Center for Global Development, “people respond to incentives” (4, 288). These incentives encourage people to work hard, build a better nation, etc. by rewarding them in some way. Once the notions of building a worldwide Soviet Union or defending the Soviet way of life were curtailed, the incentive for the Soviet people to continue working on behalf of the state diminished. There was little return for their high labor costs.

This lack of motivation and continued government oppression (especially during the Stalin and Brezhnev regimes) reached its summit during the end of the Gorbachev era. It was during this time (1988-1991) that a pattern of declining birthrates was seen (5, 137). Although normally an indicator of a working class, prosperous, industrialized nation (6, 33), Strayer writes that the Soviet people were “too discouraged to reproduce” (5, 138).

Not only did the Soviet Union fail to develop economically, it also failed to develop any social incentives for growth. Among the most prominent missing incentives was the lack of educational funding and access. According to Dziewanowski, educational funding in the Soviet Union decreased from 6.7 percent of the national budget in 1964 to 4.2 percent in 1982. Also of note is that in 1983 the Soviet Union was 3rd in “the proportion of young people engaged in higher education” but by 1990 “the USSR occupied the 42nd position” (1, 356). There was little potential for future Soviet growth without educational investment.

Not surprisingly, with such diminishing numbers of the Soviet people receiving higher educations, those with a high level of knowledge had to seek outside avenues in

order to “match” their intellect with those of equal or greater knowledge. Easterly defines “matching” as an individual’s desire to congregate with workers of equal or greater skill in order to improve and “talk shop” (4, 156).

With this in mind, it is not surprising that as a result of Gorbachev’s glasnost reform educated Russians looked to the West. Strayer points out that as the traditional Soviet isolation diminished, the Soviet people were able to compare their own lives to western culture in the areas of economics, politics, and culture (5, 128). Too often they found western culture superior, further lowering their confidence in the “communist” system. In a recent interview, even Gorbachev admitted Soviet inferiority. “We were increasingly behind the West, which ... was achieving a new technological era, a new kind of productivity ... and we couldn’t provide toothpaste for our people” (7, 1).

Further destroying the confidence of the Soviet people was the continued successes of the West (i.e. the U.S.) and an increasing number of Soviet failures in non-economic areas. Even before glasnost, the Soviet people saw an increasingly confident U.S., possibly led by their 1980 Olympic hockey victory, elect Ronald Reagan, a “preeminent anti-communist” not afraid to take on the “Evil Empire” (7, 2). Meanwhile, the Soviet military’s continued failure in Afghanistan began to chip away at the infallibility of the Red Army. The Soviet ideal was collapsing and needed to be changed.

Again repeating the pattern of extreme government reaction seen by Alexander II and Lenin, Gorbachev sought to rapidly “Westernize” the Soviet Union. According to Strayer, Gorbachev “advocated modernizing the machine-tool industry, using economic levers such as prices, profit, and credit, decentralizing economic management, and making individual enterprises responsible for their products” (5, 93).

Unfortunately, like Lenin's War Communism, Gorbachev's reforms "shocked" an unready Soviet society. His Law on State Enterprises, for example, was designed to "free the actual production unit – the enterprises – of the Soviet economy from the heavy hand of central government ministries" (5, 115), allowing competition and capitalistic profit-seeking. Its results, however, further damaged the economy as enterprise managers were unable to "read" their market and decided to produce only high-price, seldom bought goods instead of lower-price, often bought goods such as soap and toothpaste (5, 116). The Soviet leadership, perhaps by accident, naively believed they could instantaneously transform a closed, pseudo-Socialist economy into the type of economy it took the West hundreds of years to build.

Despite Gorbachev's confidence in his reform programs, they only quickened the fall of the Soviet Union. Freed by glasnost and the eventual repeal of Article Six (guaranteeing the power of the Communist party), voices of opposition arose throughout the USSR (5, 180). These voices were extremely popular to those disenfranchised by the Soviet system. They sought a nation that would allow greater incentives for success and allow something to build towards. As Gorbachev failed to provide that, popular support for the opposition grew. Combined with emerging nationalist movements, popular focus began to shift from the preservation of the Soviet ideal to the birth of individual nations.

Had Gorbachev attempted to "rescue" the Soviet economy from generations of misguided "Communism" by tweaking the Soviet economy and easing it into a capitalist system instead of "shocking" it, the Soviet Union may have lasted longer. Instead, in the spirit of previous Russian leaders, he rushed to improve his nation, thus diminishing morale and creating unexpected incentives, leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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