

Faculty of Letters and Languages – M’sila

Department of English

Level: Master One

Course: American Civilization

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Lecture Two: USSR Dissolution and the New World Order

INTRODUCTION

“From a literal wall in Berlin to the figurative “iron curtain” its territories created, the rise and fall of the Soviet Union is a dramatic story of the barriers we build and unbuild with ideological tools.” Jeff Spoden

The world saw dramatic political changes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One of history’s most iconic images is the 1989 dismantling of the infamous wall that had divided Germany since 1961. East Germany and West Germany reunified as one country. The wall’s destruction came to symbolize the abandonment of communism in East Germany as well as the disintegration of the **Warsaw Pact*** and the Soviet Union itself. How did this come about? Was socialism inherently flawed? Had a power-hungry communist bureaucracy disregarded its own people? Were people in Eastern Europe fed up with being dominated by the USSR? All of the above, and more! But this lecture will focus on the fall of the Soviet Union as part of the global movement against empire. It was a time when people all over the world over demanded freedom and an end to domination by outside nations.

***Warsaw Pact:** officially the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance commonly known as the Warsaw Pact was a collective defense treaty signed in Warsaw, Poland between the Soviet Union and seven other Eastern Bloc socialist republics of Central and Eastern Europe in May 1955, during the Cold War. (**Wikipedia**)

1-An Empire or a Union of Countries

Did the Soviet Union have an empire? If we accept a basic view of an empire as a group of peoples or countries controlled by a larger, more powerful country, then it certainly was. For centuries, Russia had been gaining control of its surrounding territories. However, in 1922, shortly after the Bolshevik revolution, those territories became part of the Soviet Union.

By conquering its neighbors, the Soviet empire was unlike other European empires. The British Empire, for example, consisted of countries all over the world. India, Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa, Yemen, Indonesia, Pakistan, Hong Kong, and many other countries were colonized and controlled by England. But while these nations were part of the British Empire, they were not part of England itself—like a big house that had a lot of extra smaller houses scattered around the property.

The Soviet Union just kept building on to the main house, incorporating its territories right into the country! Kazakh, Uzbek, Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldavia, Belarus, Turkmen, Tajik, and Azerbaijan became republics in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. So did Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, known as the Baltic States because of their position along the Baltic Sea. In essence, Russia expanded and maintained its empire by incorporating the various pieces into the new country—the USSR. Geographically, this made the empire easier to control, but it also sowed the seeds of the country’s eventual collapse. The republics had different languages, cultures, and histories. Soviet leaders tried to force all of these different peoples to adopt a unified, “Soviet” identification, but they also knew that they couldn't wipe out cultures that had existed for thousands of years. They allowed people to hold on to their ethnic identities, and they gave the republics a degree of autonomy (just as states within the US have separate governments and rights to make some of their own laws).

2-A Trojan Horse: How Introducing Liberalism accelerated the collapse of the USSR

Resistance to Soviet power beneath the surface of society was probably pretty common, but it only appeared dramatically in an occasional way before the 1980s. After the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, people in several eastern European states tried to pull away from the Warsaw Pact. This was most dramatic in Hungary, where the government announced the country would allow additional political parties outside of the communist party and would be withdrawing from the Warsaw Pact in 1956. Despite widespread popular support, this rebellion was quickly crushed by Soviet troops. Czechoslovakia tried to go its own way in 1968. The government of Alexander Dubček introduced reforms aimed at creating a democratic government. But they, too, were ousted by armed force and more obedient leaders were put in place. It seemed the Soviet Union wasn't going to allow any country to leave its sphere of influence, a policy known as the "Brezhnev Doctrine". (See appendix for which countries where

protest or rallies took place) However, things started to change when Mikhail Gorbachev became leader of the country in 1985. He knew his nation had big problems— economic stagnation, lack of individual freedoms for its people, massive expenditures to keep up with continued US nuclear build-up, and further massive expenses to maintain its hold on Eastern Europe. So **Gorbachev** put forth a two- pronged approach to changing the Soviet system: **glasnost and perestroika**. Glasnost can translate to "**openness**" or "**publicity**", and it simply meant opening the Soviet system up to greater discussion, freedom of the press, permission of criticism, and government transparency. Perestroika means "**restructuring**", which is what Gorbachev wanted for the Soviet economy and political system.

These two programs brought major changes. Many companies were now allowed to decide what to produce and how much to produce, and some farmers were given the same freedom. Co-ops were formed, basically as privately owned entities. Companies were allowed to engage in foreign trade without permission. Workers were able to push for greater protections and rights. Newspapers could publish what they wanted, and citizens—hungry for information they'd long been denied—lined up for blocks to read the commentaries of writers who would have been jailed just a few years before. Many say Gorbachev thought he was saving the Soviet Union with a few minor reforms, and that he never imagined these reforms would get out of hand. But out of hand is exactly where they got! After decades of brutal repression, people finally got the right to criticize and protest, and they held back nothing.

As the Soviet system was unraveling within and without, Gorbachev could have taken a hard line and used his powerful military to crush both internal and external rebellion. He chose not to. In fact, Leon Aron of Foreign Policy magazine, wrote that it was actually **the morality of Gorbachev and his closest allies that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union**. Aron states:

The core of Gorbachev's enterprise was undeniably idealistic... It was the beginning of a desperate search for answers to the big questions with which every great revolution starts: What is a good, dignified life? What constitutes a just social and economic order? What is a decent and legitimate state? What should such a state's relationship with civil society be?

3-Soviet Perspectives

After World War II, **Joseph Stalin** saw the world as divided into two camps: **imperialist and capitalist regimes on the one hand, and the Communist and progressive world on the other**. In 1947, President Harry Truman also spoke of two diametrically opposed systems: **one free and the other bent on subjugating other nations**.

After Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev stated in 1956 that imperialism and capitalism could coexist without war because the Communist system had become stronger. **The Geneva Summit of 1955** among Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States, and **the Camp David Summit of 1959** between Eisenhower and Khrushchev raised hopes of a more cooperative spirit between East and West. In 1963 the United States and the Soviet Union signed some confidence-building agreements.

Interspersed with such moves toward cooperation, however, were hostile acts that threatened broader conflict, such as the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 and the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia of 1968.

The long rule of Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1982) is now referred to in Russia as the **“period of stagnation.”** But the Soviet stance toward the United States became less overtly hostile in the early 1970s. Negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union resulted in summit meetings and the signing of strategic arms limitation agreements. Brezhnev proclaimed in 1973 that peaceful coexistence was the normal, permanent, and irreversible state of relations between imperialist and Communist countries, although he warned that conflict might continue in the Third World. In the late 1970s, growing internal repression and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan led to a renewal of Cold War hostility.

Soviet views of the United States changed once again after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in early 1985. Arms control negotiations were renewed and **President Reagan** undertook a new series of summit meetings with Gorbachev that led to arms reductions and facilitated a growing sympathy even among Communist leaders for more cooperation and **the rejection of a class-based, conflict-oriented view of the world**.

With President Yeltsin's recognition of independence for the other republics of the former USSR and his launching of a full- scale economic reform program designed to create a market economy, Russia was pledged at last to overcoming both the imperial and the ideological legacies of the Soviet Union.

CONCLUSION

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of most of its former republics, the United States of America became the sole superpower of the new world order. This new status gave the Americans the ability to expand their trade and diplomatic empire; with an unprecedented military and economic leverage and reach. However, at the beginning of the new millennium an unexpected attack on American soil was about to dramatically shift local and global politics to a new threat.

Exercises: In a short essay discuss one of the following topics:

1- What did Leon Aron mean by: “the morality of Gorbachev and his closest allies that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union”?

2- **Joseph Stalin** saw the world as divided into two camps: **imperialist and capitalist regimes on the one hand, and the Communist and progressive world on the other.** In 1947, President Harry Truman also spoke of two diametrically opposed systems: **one free and the other bent on subjugating other nations.**

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- <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/pcw/108229.htm>

Appendix

Key Dates and events leading to the fall of the USSR

1986	Protests and riots in Kazakhstan.
1987	Demonstrations in all three Baltic states. Major anti-Soviet protests in Lithuania. Demonstrations in Armenia.
1988	Demonstrations and deadly fighting between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. Demonstrations and calls for independence in Georgia. Protests in the Ukraine. Rallies in Belarus.
1989	Demonstrations and rioting in most of the Soviet republics; same in satellite countries. Soviet troops clash with protestors, leaving many dead and local people furious.
1990	Six republics declare their independence from the Soviet Union: Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Moldova. Soviet troops try to maintain order and keep the country from falling apart. It doesn't work.
1991	The dam breaks, with <u>all</u> of the satellites, the Baltic states, and most of the republics declaring either independence or political autonomy. The Soviet Union is defunct.