

History

Gorbachev's Perestroika and the Collapse of the Soviet Union

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The late 1980s were a period of change, reform and eventually demise within the Soviet Union. These political and economic reforms were spearheaded by Mikhail Gorbachev, who became General Secretary in 1985 and used his position to enact a series of humanitarian, democratic reforms aimed at improving the communist system from within. Under previous leaders, the Soviet economy stalled, party ideology drifted away from its Marxist roots and the government continued to wield an oppressive hand over the people. In an attempt to fix the flagging economy and re-energize party doctrine, Gorbachev introduced the philosophy of perestroika, meaning restructuring. Perestroika allowed for more freedoms in the market, including some market economy mechanisms. However, perestroika did not only deal with the economy; it dealt with politics as well. The political reorganization called for a multi-candidate system and allowed opposition groups to speak out against communism. Although the motivations and intentions of perestroika are debated in the historiography of the period, its importance to the Cold War is clearly evident. To some degree, perestroika contributed to the fall of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Although Gorbachev was trying to save the system, his reforms contributed to its end.

The fall of the Soviet Union, although it was not entirely surprising, rocked the world in 1991. A number of factors both behind the iron curtain and abroad contributed, in some way, to the collapse of the communist regime, including American rearmament, growing rebellious sentiments within the Soviet bloc and Gorbachev's reform policies, specifically perestroika. The system was crumbling before Gorbachev came to power and although he attempted to save it by enacting reform policies that allowed for greater freedoms and diversity in the economy, the reforms effectively dealt the final, fatal blow. Perestroika was driven by Gorbachev's humanitarian sentiment but did little to solidify the communist party's hold over the people. It was a key player among a host of other factors in the fall of the Soviet Union because it allowed for the spread of democratic ideals and further alienated the government from the people because it failed to solve the issues plaguing the empire.

Conditions in the Soviet Union prior to 1985 had steadily declined, especially in terms of the economy. Under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev, the economy stalled and eventually fell into decline. Brezhnev's economic policies were based

on the basic Stalinist principles of “state ownership of land and non-agricultural capital, collectivized farming, centralized planning of most production and intermediate consumption, and state provision of housing and basic amenities.”¹ These principles initially fostered a growing economy but as Brezhnev’s reign wore on, the emphasis on military spending and the lack of production of consumer goods crippled the economy; there was simply not enough capital or resources to support the type of economy that the government desired. According to economist Mark Harrison, the fundamental problem was that the financial planners overloaded goods producers with superfluous products; supply simply did not meet demand.² The efficiency of government-owned factories was also not considered when funds were distributed. Brezhnev attempted to reform the economy and promote efficiency but his policies were widely ineffective and weak.³ Finally, because the government controlled the prices of consumer goods and usually fixed them above or below market value the economy was unbalanced. Although the economy began to stagnate during Khrushchev’s term as General Secretary, Brezhnev did not enact policies that ended the stagnation and in fact his policies only pushed the economy further into decline.⁴

This economic decline only worsened during the gerontocracy period, which culminated in the regimes of Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko in the early 1980s.⁵ The two leaders were both advanced in age and were generally out of touch with the Soviet people. In fact, Chernenko was seventy two when he became General Secretary and was more concerned with maintaining the status quo of the Marxist-Leninist government than with doing anything to reform or improve the conditions within the empire.⁶ Their age and rise within the party linked

1 Mark Harrison, “Economic Growth and Slowdown.” *Brezhnev Reconsidered*. Eds Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 52.

2 Ibid, 54.

3 Ibid, 55.

4 Harrison, 52.

5 Ilya Zemtsov and John Farrar, *Gorbachev: The Man and the System* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 11.

6 Ilya Zemtsov, *Chernenko: The Last Bolshevik* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publisher, 1989), 162.

them with Stalin, which was for all intents and purposes a negative thing because Stalin's name had become synonymous with purges and harsh oppression.⁷ While the oppression of the people under Stalin's successors was generally not as harsh, it was still very prevalent. Historian Ilya Zemtsov argues that "Chernenko's weakness was due to the fact that the task he envisioned for himself, to bring the Communist system to the twenty-first century by means of old or at least insufficiently up-to-date methods of governing, was a mission impossible."⁸ Essentially, his main focus was to maintain the Soviet system by relying on what had worked in the past. However, this plan was ineffective because the Soviet Union was different than it had been decades earlier and needed to be reformed in order to stay relevant on the world stage. Because the two leaders collectively served for only three years,⁹ their effect on the country was minimal and acted only to maintain the conditions of the USSR, not change them.

There were other problems within the Soviet Union, however, during the Brezhnev and late gerontocracy years. The government continued to harshly oppress the people and oftentimes refused to enact policies that were aimed at improving life. As Ben Fowkes wrote, "Brezhnev's general attitude was to let sleeping dogs lie."¹⁰ Fowkes points out that while Brezhnev did attempt to promote ethnic equalization and improve education, these policies essentially failed and actually worsened ethnic relations and weakened the public education system. Conditions gradually deteriorated despite, or maybe because of, the actions of the government.¹¹ The ethnic equalization aspect of Soviet ideology played an important role in the rapid breakdown of relations between the communist parties within the USSR. The Soviet Union was comprised of several separate nations that represented

7 Ibid, 9.

8 Ibid, 165.

9 Andropov served as General Secretary from November 1982 until his death in February 1984. Chernenko served from February 1984 until his death in March 1985.

10 Ben Fowkes, "The National Question in the Soviet Union under Leonid Brezhnev: Policy and Response." *Brezhnev Reconsidered*. Eds Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 70.

11 Ibid, 70-71.

a handful of different ethnic groups. These groups had different languages, cultures and histories and each wanted to maintain their cultural identity within the Soviet bloc.¹² While the government attempted to unite the people under the Soviet flag, they failed to inspire a sense of Soviet nationalism in the people. Cultural nationalism was at play and eroded the cohesion between the Soviet government and the various peoples, which threatened the power and oppressive force of the regime.

It was against this backdrop of economic decline and political instability that Mikhail Gorbachev came to power. The ascension of Gorbachev to the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party represented a new age in Soviet politics. He came to the position in 1985, following the death of Chernenko a mere year after his appointment as head of the party. At the time, he was fifty four years old, which made him the youngest General Secretary since Stalin.¹³ His comparative youth gave him a different perspective from prior leaders and allowed him to move away from Stalinist thinking because his rise in the party was not connected to direct participation in the 1917 Revolution.¹⁴ Gorbachev hailed from “a peasant family that was one of the first in the [Northern Caucasus] region to join a collective farm.”¹⁵ This humble background played a large role in his political thinking and gave him a strong humanitarian sympathy. His separation from the old regime gave him greater freedoms to move away from old thinking and enact policies grounded in a new way of thinking. According to George Breslauer, Gorbachev faced different circumstances when assuming power than his predecessors had because the people were calling out for “vigorous leadership to push the country in new directions.”¹⁶ At the same time, this calling out for change facilitated Gorbachev’s departure from Stalinist policies. It was apparent that Stalinist thinking did not work and a shift in ideology needed to occur in order to save the system from within.

Quickly after becoming General Secretary, Gorbachev was faced “with an avalanche of problems. It was vital to change [the] relationship with the West, particularly the United States, and to bring the costly and dangerous arms race to an

12 Ibid, 72.

13 Zhores A. Medvedev, *Gorbachev* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986), 2.

14 Zemtsov and Farrar, 1-2.

15 Ibid, 2.

16 George W. Breslauer, *Gorbachev and Yeltsin as Leaders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 42.

end.”¹⁷ Essentially, he recognized the issues facing the USSR and knew that those issues had to be dealt with quickly in order to ensure the survival of the regime. The fact that he was not affiliated with Stalin allowed him to politely denounce previous government policies and go in a new direction. That new direction was a return to pure Leninist thinking that was not diluted by Stalinist purges and oppression.¹⁸ At the same time, Gorbachev had to exercise a degree of caution while distancing himself from Stalin to be sure he maintained the support of other members of the Central Committee. He had to craft “solutions that he could sell politically and that would build his authority- his legitimacy and credibility- as a leader.”¹⁹ However, the fact that conditions had become so dire gave Gorbachev more incentive and need to reform the system. Also, his policies had more support initially because people recognized the need for drastic change. Because of Gorbachev’s political distance from his predecessors, he was able to move away from Stalinist thinking without the risk of tainting his legitimacy.

Gorbachev’s political ideology has been called ‘new thinking’ by his contemporaries, historians, and Gorbachev himself. He had a fresh perspective on Marxist ideology and was able to use that new perspective to garner support for himself and his policies. Historian Zhores Medvedev credits Gorbachev’s popularity to “his energetic, charismatic, competent and obviously intelligent personality.”²⁰ The fact that he appeared to be intelligent and enigmatic worked to his favor and initially allowed him to gain the confidence and support of the Soviet people. It seems as though many of his contemporaries were hopeful that “he might manage to unite people and inspire them to greater and more effective feats of work and endurance.”²¹ Additionally, Gorbachev displayed a great concern for his people and was preoccupied with humanitarian goals. It appears that a majority of his policies were grounded in the desire to improve life in the Soviet Union and promote basic human rights. This humanitarianism further demonstrated the shift in the communist government because Gorbachev was more concerned with the people than with maintaining a harsh stance on strict Marxist-Leninist ideology. While he was

17 Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 171.

18 Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 180.

19 Breslauer, 44.

20 Medvedev, 183.

21 *Ibid*, 183.

focused on consolidating and maintaining his position in the party, he also considered how his actions and policy decisions affected the people he was chosen to lead.²² Throughout his term he attempted to find and maintain a balance between his humanitarian sentiments and the harsh leadership that the party demanded of him.

During the early years of Gorbachev's term, a series of reforms were articulated that were aimed at restructuring the economy and loosening up the restrictions on the media and other forms of public opposition or openness. Because the economy was so weak and internal operations were inefficient, the system needed to be reformed and re-energized. Gorbachev recognized that need and attempted to fix the problems through a series of sweeping reforms headlined by glasnost and perestroika.²³ These two policies truly go hand in hand, and according to Gorbachev, "without glasnost there would have been no perestroika."²⁴ In the simplest terms, glasnost is defined as openness. It allowed for greater freedom in the press and a better flow of ideas in and out of the Iron Curtain. Gorbachev argued that glasnost "awakened people from their social slumber, helped them overcome indifference and passivity and become aware of the stake they had in change and of its important implications for their lives."²⁵ The intent of glasnost was to allow dissenting voices to legally be heard and also to allow people to see what conditions were like outside of the Soviet Union in the hopes that it would reaffirm their support for communism. However, the exact parameters and overall aims of glasnost were not directly articulated by Gorbachev or his government.²⁶ This failure to clearly state the purposes and meanings of policies were a problem that plagued Gorbachev's reforms until the fall of the Soviet Union.

Perestroika, on the other hand, was focused on restructuring the economy and helping stop its decline. Historian Robert Grogin provided the following definition of the policy:

22 Zemtsov and Farrar, 32.

23 Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 172-173.

24 Mikhail Gorbachev, *On My Country and the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 61.

25 Gorbachev, *On My Country and the World*, 61.

26 Medvedev, 219.

Perestroika was designed to cure the economic inertia, overhaul the bureaucracy, the Communist Party, and even the military, and so make the country more competitive. The restructuring of the Soviet economy came to include a partial reduction of the central planning system, the introduction of market mechanisms, an emphasis on quality, the more efficient employment of labor, and the infusion of new investment and technologies into industry.²⁷

Gorbachev identified his intent for perestroika in a book that was published in 1987. He wrote, "Perestroika is an urgent necessity arising from the profound processes of development in our socialist society. This society is ripe for change. It has long been yearning for it."²⁸ Essentially he was arguing that the system had to be changed and that the people desired that change. The fact that the economy was so bad prompted him to take action in an attempt to improve it and halt the damage being done by the astronomical spending demanded by rearmament and war communism.²⁹ However, perestroika was extremely complex and encompassed a wide variety of issues and reforms.³⁰ One of Gorbachev's ministers, Yegor Ligachev,

27 Robert C. Grogan, *Natural Enemies: The United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War, 1917-1991* (New York: Lexington Books, 2001).324.

28 Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 17.

29 War communism was an economic system in effect from 1918-1921 in which normal economic mechanisms were suspended in favor of war production in order to keep the Bolshevik army supplied during the Russian Civil War. The system included the nationalization of key industries, requisition of agricultural surpluses, rationing of the food supply and military-style control of infrastructure. War communism was meant to aid the Bolsheviks during the civil war but had disastrous effects on the Russian economy. It was replaced by Lenin's New Economic Policy in 1921.

30 Medvedev, 118-119.

described perestroika as a “socialist renewal, a deliverance from the Stalinist and post-Stalinist entanglements that bound society.”³¹ Ligachev’s description provides further insight into Gorbachev’s intent in creating perestroika: he needed to permanently break the ties that bound society to Stalinist ideology and create a new way of thinking to drive his government. Perestroika’s effect on Soviet society was as complex as the actual reforms were and played a key role in the downfall of the communist regime.

In terms of the actual reforms, the overall goal of perestroika was to restructure the economy in such a way as to promote its growth. Gorbachev argued that the main priority in the development of perestroika “was to put the economy into some kind of order, to tighten up discipline, to raise the level of organization and responsibility, and to catch up areas where [the country was] behind.”³² In order to achieve that end, Gorbachev organized a group of Party leaders and economists to perform an in-depth analysis of the Soviet economy to determine the causes of the decline. That analysis was used to draft the initial policy to be implemented.³³ The analysis essentially recommended that there be a “profound structural reorganization of the economy, in reconstruction of its material base, in new technologies, in investment policy changes, and in high standards in management.”³⁴ The Soviet economy was backward, lacked technology and did not have the financial backing to support it. Gorbachev used perestroika as a means to fix the problems identified by the extensive analysis. When he initially introduced perestroika as his main economic policy, he drew a parallel between it and Lenin’s New Economic Policy.³⁵ By aligning himself and his policies with Lenin, Gorbachev was again distancing himself from Stalin by arguing that the country needed to return to its Leninist roots. In fact, he gave a speech on November 2, 1987 in which he claimed that perestroika was the continuation of the 1917 Revolution and signaled a return to true Leninist thinking.³⁶ In effect, he was able to garner much support for perestroika by compar-

31 Yegor Ligachev, *Inside Gorbachev’s Kremlin: The Memoirs of Yegor Ligachev* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 71.

32 Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*, 27.

33 Ibid, 27-28.

34 Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*, 27.

35 Breslauer, 49.

36 Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 241.

ing it to Lenin's NEP and differentiating it from the policies of Stalin that Gorbachev characterized as corrupt and ineffective.

Initially, perestroika was generally well-received by the public. Ligachev asserts that "although the full satisfaction of needs was still far off, people lived with faith in the future. Truly, a time of great hopes had arrived."³⁷ Perestroika offered the promise of a prosperous future and seemed to be effective shortly after the initial steps were put into practice. Furthermore, he claims that because society was rejuvenated and signs of social progress were complemented by rapid economic stabilization, the people remained united and supportive of Gorbachev and his policies.³⁸ Gorbachev claims that because the people still believed in the potential of their country, they supported perestroika and thought that the reforms could help the USSR "surpass the developed nations of the West [or] at least eliminate the enormous gap between us."³⁹ Also, the working class, which constituted the largest group of people in the Soviet Union, believed that they would receive wider variety of goods and services and a more efficient handling of social and economic issues, which they would greatly benefit from.⁴⁰ At the same time, there was a degree of hesitation regarding the reforms, specifically in terms of concerns over the "inevitable price increases for stable foodstuffs and services...and stepped-up rent rates for surplus housing over the State-guaranteed minimum."⁴¹ It is evident that while there was overall feeling of hope and faith in perestroika initially, there was also a level of hesitation regarding how perestroika would actually affect economic and social issues.

The hope and faith in perestroika felt by the Soviet people at first quickly began to wane in the years following its introduction. By 1987, there was an overwhelming tension in Soviet society that arose from their worries over perestroika. The fact that the economy had not stabilized and grown as hoped caused the

37 Ligachev, 314.

38 Ligachev, 313-314.

39 Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 218.

40 Tatyana I. Zaslavskaya, "Friends or Foes? Social Forces for and Against Perestroika." *Perestroika 1989*. Ed. Abel Aganbegyan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), 256.

41 Ibid, 256.

people to lose faith in the system.⁴² Gorbachev wrote in his memoirs that there was a growing sense of “confusion caused by the haphazard transition of industry to a system of cost accounting, self-financing and self-management. Those who feared change began to capitalize on troubles.”⁴³ There was a shift in the overall feeling toward perestroika because it appeared that the reforms were not working fast enough and were not fixing the problems to the satisfaction of the people. At the same time, the exact parameters of perestroika had not yet been directly articulated or enacted and Gorbachev and his ministers were continuing to change and rework them.⁴⁴ This continual change in policy and direction only worked to strengthen the confusion of the people, which heightened their distrust and growing dislike of Gorbachev and his policies.

The formulation of perestroika by the Soviet government affected not only internal Soviet affairs but external foreign affairs as well, especially in terms of how Gorbachev was viewed by President Ronald Reagan of the United States and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain. In his personal diary, Reagan wrote in 1985 that he believed “that Gorbachev will be as tough as any of their leaders. If he wasn’t a confirmed ideologue he never would have been chosen by the Politburo.”⁴⁵ However, later on in 1985 after the first hinting at perestroika had been made public Reagan conceded that Gorbachev “is a different type than past Soviet leaders and that we can get along.”⁴⁶ It is evident because of the way in which Reagan described Gorbachev in his journal that Reagan believed that he could negotiate with Gorbachev and that Soviet policy would be different under Gorbachev than it had been under previous leaders. However, Reagan sought to use Gorbachev’s perceived willingness to negotiate to his advantage and push for an end to the bitter relations between the two superpowers. Historian Norman A. Graebner argues that Reagan resolved that the United States needed to “employ the country’s economic power to aggravate the Kremlin’s domestic problems and thereby weaken its control over

42 Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 239-240.

43 Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 240.

44 Ibid, 242.

45 Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*. Ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 317.

46 Ibid, 337.

the Soviet empire."⁴⁷ The economy of the United States was considerably stronger than that of the Soviet Union and Reagan aimed to use that strength to push the Soviet Union to its financial limits as a way to damage the government's control. The way to achieve that end was to rapidly rearm the United States with nuclear weapons. To achieve that end, Reagan developed the Strategic Defense Initiative and other policies to facilitate rearmament.⁴⁸ The two nations were engaged in an arms race throughout the Cold War and the Soviet Union had to respond to US rearmament with rearmament of her own. However, her economy was simply financially unable to afford more weapons.

Reagan's views and strategies regarding Gorbachev's governments were largely shared by his political ally and friend Margaret Thatcher. Throughout her time as Prime Minister, she took a harsh stance against communism and in a speech proclaimed, "If we stick to our democratic principles then we have nothing to fear."⁴⁹ She advocated for taking a harsh stance against communism and enacted foreign and domestic policies to do just that. Similar to Reagan's approach, Thatcher recognized the weak nature of the Soviet economy and "was not alone in describing the USSR as an economic failure and in believing that it had to collapse one day."⁵⁰ Most western nations shared the view that the command economy system was bound to fail and could not support the massive spending required by rapid rearmament. Thatcher supported Reagan's rearmament policies and advocated for British rearmament as a way to strengthen the democratic stance against communism and further force the Soviets into unrealistic weapons development.⁵¹ Thatcher recognized that Gorbachev was an intelligent man and did not underestimate him, yet also knew that his country could not financially back up the claims he made regarding the economy's ability to sustain rapid arms buildup.⁵² Additionally, she saw that

47 Norman A. Graebner, et al, *Reagan, Bush, Gorbachev: Revisiting the End of the Cold War* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008), 37.

48 Grogin, 329.

49 John Blundell, *Margaret Thatcher: A Portrait of the Iron Lady* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008), 141.

50 Ibid, 144.

51 Blundell, 145-146.

52 Ibid, 147.

his regime became increasingly less popular because the economic problems were not being solved.

Many historians and politicians alike describe Reagan and Thatcher as 'political soul mates' who worked together to form a wall against the iron curtain. Indeed, their rearmament policies placed a huge strain on the Soviet economy despite the efforts of Gorbachev and perestroika.⁵³ Eventually, the financial strain of developing nuclear weapons became too high for the Soviet economy to handle, while the US and British economies were, for the most part, able to handle it. Despite Gorbachev's best efforts, perestroika was unable to fix the economy enough to the satisfaction of the people nor was it able to support the amount of spending necessary to compete with American rearmament. In an attempt to halt the arms buildup and allow the Soviet economy time to catch up to the West, "Gorbachev continued to stress the absurdity of strategies that encouraged the costly and potentially dangerous arms race."⁵⁴ By characterizing the continual buildup of arms as absurd and dangerous, Gorbachev was attempting to level the playing field of sorts between the superpowers. Additionally, he advocated "the need for imaginative thinking to meet the challenges of changing times."⁵⁵ This imaginative thinking mainly involved peaceful confrontation, peaceful rivalry, and more open relations between the communist East and democratic West. The continued overall weakness of the Soviet economy plagued Gorbachev's regime and perestroika did not allow the economy to rise to a level where it could compete with rival economies, specifically the American and British economies.

However, perestroika was not the only factor that played a role in causing the fall of the Soviet Union. A handful of other factors, both foreign and domestic, influenced and affected the crumbling of the system and contributed to its eventual demise. One factor that contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union was the fact that official Soviet ideology allowed for "the lack of legal safeguards against the abuse of power, the sordid reality of Soviet social and political life contributed to the fragility and collapse of the Soviet system."⁵⁶ Historian Sigmund Krancberg articulated this view in a book published in 1994. He argues that the failings of the

53 Graebner, 90.

54 Ibid, 91.

55 Graebner, 91.

56 Sigmund Krancberg, *A Soviet Postmortem: Philosophical Roots of the 'Grand Failure'* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1994), 140.

Soviet system resulted from the fact that the ideology upon which it was based was unable to support the realities of the government. The corruption of government officials and the overall weakness of the economy were at odds with the official doctrine of the regime, which caused it to lose the support of the people.⁵⁷ According to this school of thought, the true progression of socialism halted and became constrained by human corruption, which led to its failure. Krancberg acknowledges that Gorbachev attempted to redirect the nation back to the true Leninist path, but claimed that perestroika and his other reforms were enacted too late and were not powerful enough to save the crumbling regime.⁵⁸ Finally, he asserted that while perestroika was based on Leninist ideology, it was not strictly based on that ideology, which only added to its failure.

Another aspect that contributed to the end of the Cold War was joint American and British rearmament and pressures on the Soviet Union to follow suit. George Urban, a former director of Radio Free Europe, stated that "American rearmament under President Reagan, and especially the SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative) project, conjured up for an already declining Soviet economy the prospect of so heavy an extra burden...that [would] cause the USSR to spend itself into near-bankruptcy."⁵⁹ Because the economy was in such harsh decline, it simply could not afford to keep up with the rapid rearmament policies of Reagan. Additionally, Gorbachev's glasnost allowed the Soviet people to finally see what life was like in democratic countries. This cultural exchange fostered unrest in the people because the contrast between conditions in the Soviet Union and in western countries was exposed; they were able to see how far behind their country really was.⁶⁰ Finally, Urban contends that democratic broadcasts like Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty helped foster a sentiment of rebellion in the people and encouraged them to rise up against the communist system.⁶¹ Communism was unable to compete with the strength of democracy and fell partly because of it.

57 Ibid, 141-142.

58 Krancberg, 145.

59 George Urban, "US Democracy Contributed to the Collapse of Soviet Communism." *The Breakup of the Soviet Union: Opposing Viewpoints*. Eds William Barbour and Carol Wekesser (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1994), 19.

60 Ibid, 20-21.

61 Ibid, 19-20.

The third contributing element to the fall of the communist government was an element of chance that caused the USSR to collapse on its own. Essentially, the system was not equipped to survive long term and collapsed due to its own weight. Historian Karen Dawisha claims that the system itself caused its decline because it was, by definition, inefficient, corrupt, and incompetent and prevented basic human freedoms.⁶² The fact that human freedoms were suppressed hindered the government from being fully supported by the people. At the same time, the fact that the government was rampant with corruption pushed the regime off the true Marxist-Leninist path.⁶³ It is impossible to remove the human nature element from government, meaning that the government could not have prevented its officials from becoming corrupt or at least from falling victim to bribes and other bad behaviors. The Soviet Union had pockets of corrupt groups throughout the various ministries and was powerless against them or the corruption that they bred.⁶⁴ However, this corruption was detrimental because it diminished the trust the people held in the government and inspired feelings of rebellion in them. It seems like the system was flawed from the beginning and collapsed partly because it was unable to live up to the high moral and political standards it set for itself.

Finally, Gorbachev's attempts at reforms and their overall weakness played a role in ending the Cold War. In a memoir, Gorbachev claims, "Despite internal and external difficulties, however, the foreign policy of perestroika produced tangible and indisputably positive results based on the ideas of the new thinking. The primary and fundamental result was that the Cold War was brought to an end thanks to perestroika and the new thinking."⁶⁵ According to him, the new thinking about human freedoms and the democratization of the Soviet government ultimately led to the regime change. He explicitly states that perestroika was the main cause of the end of the Cold War and praises the restructuring for bringing the world away from the brink of nuclear war. At the same time, Gorbachev's humanitarian sentiments contributed to the failings of his reforms. As A.S. Cherniaev wrote, "the disintegration of Cold War structures without and the growing disarray within the Soviet Union were of the same origin, they both followed from Gorbachev's ideas based

62 Karen Dawisha, "The Question of Questions: Was the Soviet Union Worth Saving?" *Slavic Review* 63, no. 3 (2004): 516.

63 Ibid, 517-518.

64 Ibid, 518.

65 Gorbachev, *On My Country and the World*, 205.

on universal human values.”⁶⁶ Gorbachev’s policies were at odds with official state doctrine, which damaged his popularity and made Party ideology seem hypocritical. Although the end of the regime was not the initially-desired result, it was the end result and it saved the world from an all-out nuclear war. It is as though Gorbachev recognized defeat and knew that the system could not survive. Grogin argued,

with perestroika failing and worried at the prospect of its country’s

demise, the Soviet leadership might have been tempted to indulge

itself in overly aggressive foreign policy to reverse the decline at home, solve its domestic problems, and preserve national unity.

This was potentially a very dangerous moment. Fortunately, the

leadership lost its nerve and chose to retreat...Gorbachev elected

to end the Cold War, relinquish its satellites, and allow the

Soviet Union to split up peacefully.⁶⁷

He essentially claimed that Gorbachev was forced to face defeat when he realized that his policies were not working as planned and begrudgingly allowed the government to collapse because he had no other option. This theory supports the notion that Gorbachev supported the collapse of his regime by the time that the revolts of 1991 began taking place.

Other historians agree with Gorbachev that perestroika and other policies aided in the collapse of the regime, but argue that the reforms were weak and did not do enough to fix the problems that the empire was facing.⁶⁸ According to this school of thought, Gorbachev did not want the government to collapse nor did he allow it to happen easily. Instead of allowing the system to run its course and

⁶⁶ A.S. Cherniaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 306.

⁶⁷ Grogin, 346.

⁶⁸ Graebner, 118.

collapse, he fought it until the very end when he was pushed out of power. Perestroika and the other reforms were simply too little too late. Graebner asserts, "The growing irrelevance of the political structure, even under Gorbachev's leadership, seemed incapable of meeting the country's pervading economic crisis."⁶⁹ Graebner is arguing that despite Gorbachev's best efforts, his policies were not able to combat the true problems plaguing the Soviet economy. It seems as though Gorbachev was blinded or more concerned with his humanitarian sympathies, which made him focus his policies on the human aspect instead of enacting policies that were completely economically or politically sound. The fact that perestroika was largely unsuccessful led to a "steady erosion of faith in the communist system all over the bloc."⁷⁰ Furthermore, it revealed a deep crisis in Soviet society and government, mainly in terms of the backwardness of the communist system. Perestroika allowed for market-like conditions and some democratization of the system, which allowed Soviet society to gain an understanding of how backward their system was in comparison to the West.⁷¹ After seeing the benefits of a democratic system, many rebellious movements sprang up that were aimed at overthrowing the communist system in order to modernize and democratize. While these movements would previously have been harshly suppressed, they were allowed to flourish under the new openness policies.

As these revolt movements developed and started gaining a real following, Gorbachev basically had his hands tied and was unable to harshly put down the movements because of the freedoms of speech and dissention allowed by glasnost. It seems as though Gorbachev's policies played a role in his demise: he allowed for dissension and was then destroyed by it.⁷² Ligachev pointed out in his memoir that by 1990 "society began to lose its political stability; the idea that everything was permitted gained the upper hand. Discipline dropped precipitously, law and order collapsed, and regulations were not enforced."⁷³ The government loosened its grip and conceded some of its control, which led to a degree of chaos among the people. He goes on to state that Gorbachev eventually had to come to terms with a new reality for the regime: "Instead of renewing and improving socialism, the sys-

69 Ibid, 124.

70 Grogin, 319.

71 P. V. Volobuev and Kurt S. Schultz, "Perestroika and the October Revolution in Soviet Historiography," *The Russian Review* 51, no. 4 (1992): 568.

72 Volobuev, 569-570.

73 Ligachev, 318.

tem was to be replaced."⁷⁴ It appears that Ligachev, and the rest of the government, realized that they had relinquished too much of their control and that it would be impossible to gain it back. The only solution was a total overhaul of the system, which came in the form of the 1991 collapse. However, Ligachev does maintain that the intent of the reforms was to strengthen the communist system, not bring about its demise. He contends that the end of the Cold War occurred spontaneously and that the government could not have prevented it from happening.

By 1991, conditions within the Soviet bloc had deteriorated so much that the communist government faced total destruction and eventually was overthrown in favor of a more democratic-style system. However, the issues which led to the collapse of the system were smoldering under the surface for a number of years. These forces boiled over in 1991 and caused Gorbachev's government to be overthrown in a coup. A possible collapse or total reorganization of the government became evident as early as 1989. As George Breslauer wrote, "There is general agreement among observers that 1989 was the year during which Gorbachev lost control of the social forces that his policies of glasnost, perestroika, and demokratizatsiya had unleashed."⁷⁵ The freedoms and social forces that Gorbachev had allowed to develop and prosper under his policies essentially grew to a level that the government could no longer control. Again, it is evident that Gorbachev's regime was destroyed by the very policies it created. Additionally, the contradictory nature of perestroika was heightened because Gorbachev often "moved cautiously and with half-measures."⁷⁶ Essentially he preached liberalism and new thinking but in practice did not set up institutions to allow the liberal ideas to flourish. In terms of economic policies, "he reduced the prerogatives of ministries and central planners, but went slow on (or entirely avoided) the construction of market institutions, de-monopolization of the economy, and liberalization of prices."⁷⁷ In effect the reforms were almost half-hearted and not implemented wholly, which caused major problems for Gorbachev and his ministers. Although the government was already floundering by 1989, it was not until 1991 that it was finally consumed by combined internal and external pressures.

The actual collapse of the communist regime and breakup of the Soviet Union occurred gradually during the summer and early fall of 1991. Throughout the summer, a wave of pro-democratic sentiment swept through the Soviet Union

74 Ibid, 320.

75 Breslauer, 123.

76 Ibid, 81.

77 Ibid, 81.

and threatened to topple the communist regime in favor of democratically-elected leaders in each of the countries of the Soviet bloc. This push for democracy was present in all levels of society, including within the government itself. In August, a coup was staged in the attempt of overthrowing the communist regime and installing a democratic government.⁷⁸ The main members of the coup were members of the military, KGB, and a handful of government officials. Although the coup was complex, the basic plan involved placing Gorbachev under house arrest at his vacation home in the Crimea and replacing his regime with a democratic-minded one.⁷⁹ Initially, the coup succeeded but it was short-lived; the new government was only in place for three days before Gorbachev was able to free himself from his isolation in the Crimea and return to Moscow. However, his return to the government was also short-lived. Soon after Gorbachev returned and attempted to regain control of the government, right-wing groups throughout the Soviet Union began calling for democratic elections and further freedoms for the people. Almost as though he recognized defeat Gorbachev was forced to step down and acknowledge the independence of the Eastern European nations who had been part of the USSR and recognize their newly-created democratic governments.⁸⁰ In Russia, Boris Yeltsin ascended to power and set up a more democratic-style government.⁸¹ Almost as quickly as it had risen to power, the communist party was overthrown and the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

Although the historiography of the Cold War period offers a variety of theories that purport to have been the sole cause of the collapse of the Soviet regime, it is clear that the collapse was, in fact, caused by a combination of factors, with perestroika and Gorbachev's other reforms being the final failure that sealed the fate of the already-crumbling government. All of the factors involved worked together to create a situation that the government could not recover from. The weakness of the economy coupled with pressures from the West to rearm, a rise in dissension among the Soviet people and the government's loosening grip over the empire crippled the regime and effectively caused the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. In terms of perestroika's role in the collapse, its general vagueness and lack of substantive economic recovery results hugely contributed to the erosion of the support that the people had for the communist government. According to Michael

78 Eduard Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs to Freedom*. Trans. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 218.

79 Ibid, 218-220.

80 Ibid, 219-222.

81 Breslauer, 141-142.

McFaul, "economic decline, technological backwardness, and modernization pressures shaped the preferences of the decision-makers who initiated institutional reform in the Soviet Union."⁸² However, the reforms that those decision-makers chose to enact were weak and set into motion immense institutional change that made the communist system irrelevant and unable to stop the growing dissension movements. In essence, the regime was consumed by the very forces it had unleashed and was unable to stop the total overhaul of the system in 1991.⁸³ While McFaul argues that the collapse was not inevitable, he asserts that it eventually became unavoidable because of the combination of weak policies, economic stagnation, and rearmament pressures.⁸⁴

The issue of the inevitability of the collapse of the Soviet Union is widely debated in the historiography of the Cold War. McFaul and other historians argue that it was not inevitable and claim that the communist system simply ran its course and succumbed to its own weakness and bad policies.⁸⁵ On the other hand, some historians and Soviet contemporaries argue that the collapse was inevitable or at least became inevitable because of the poor management and human corruption element of the communist system. Gorbachev even noted in his memoir that by 1991 the USSR faced a serious issue: "whether it would continue as a real federation in a renewed form or would disintegrate and crumble, with dire consequences for the people."⁸⁶ Whichever way the country progressed, even Gorbachev expressed his realization that the old system, even with some reform, was not going to be saved and that a change was necessary. He also acknowledged that the system became obsolete and was not capable of lasting much longer. While it is a plausible conclusion that the system was not equipped to last, it does not mean that the collapse in 1991 was completely inevitable.

It is apparent that while the collapse was not entirely inevitable, it eventually became unavoidable. The main reason why it became unavoidable is relatively simple: the Soviet Union could not afford to keep pace with the West and suffered

82 Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 33.

83 Ibid, 34-35.

84 Ibid, 33.

85 Ibid, 36-37.

86 Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 626.

from weak internal leadership. As former First Secretary of the Communist Party of Soviet Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze wrote in his memoir,

From the outset, it was clear to all that the old methods of confrontation and the elevation of ideology above politics and law were no longer suitable. By remaining stuck in the old positions, we could not stop the arms race, which was bleeding our already anemic country, or reestablish cooperation with the West...But the moment the new thinking touched the old shackles that held the Soviet Union together and kept it dominant, the situation changed drastically.⁸⁷

He implied that the Soviet Union was unable to remain a main player on the world stage because of its overall economic weakness and the government recognized that it needed to change its policies and ideology. However, the attempts it made at reforming the crumbling system were not enough. The situation worsened to a virtual point of no return and the fact that the people were legally allowed to voice dissenting political opinions permitted them to call for a total overhaul of the system. Again, Gorbachev allowed for dissension and was ultimately consumed by it because his regime was unable to deliver the prosperity and success it promised. Also, the fact that partial democratization took place only made the people call out for more democratic freedoms and institutions. It was a combination of internal issues and immense external pressures that ultimately caused the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

Perestroika's role in the final crumbling of the communist system, however, cannot be discounted. The weakness of the Soviet economy was a major problem and the fact that it was not solved by perestroika was harmful to the entire communist system. While Gorbachev's intentions were to improve the system from within and to reorganize the existing system, the outcome was completely different.⁸⁸ Because the Soviets were facing both internal and external pressures, they could

87 Shevardnadze, 5-6.

88 Medvedev, 246.

not overcome either one. It was a combination of pressures from the West to rearm, growing democratic movements within the USSR, and the perpetually weak economy that caused the communists to be overthrown. There were too many insurmountable problems and they all affected each other. Perestroika simply did not bring the economy back up to a level at which it could compete with the West. Gorbachev even recognized that perestroika did not achieve the kind of economic success that he, and the people, desired: "Perestroika did not give the people prosperity, something expected of me, head of state, based on an ingrained, traditional feeling of dependence."⁸⁹ Additionally, the fact that Gorbachev failed to directly and sufficiently define and enact it further added to its failure. In effect, perestroika was an idea that was articulated too late in the decline of the Soviet empire and did too little to fix the problems it was intended to fix. In a way, the failings of perestroika were the final nail in the coffin of the already-ailing Soviet regime.

The collapse of the Soviet Union occurred due to a handful of causes that, when combined, could not be overcome. Many of the pressures that the government faced were cyclical: the weakness of the economy made it impossible for the Soviets to rearm at the same rate as the West and the limited rearmament that the Soviets were doing only heightened the stagnating economy.⁹⁰ Additionally, Gorbachev's humanitarian sentiment prompted him to legalize certain rights, freedoms and market-style institutions, but ultimately his regime became a victim of the ideals he introduced into society. Robert Grogin argues that "the reality, of course, was that declining rates of growth and technological stagnation led to a loss of confidence in central planning and to a widespread hatred of communist rule."⁹¹ This widespread hatred of the communist regime was legally allowed to be expressed, which led to mass movements for the end of communism. Because perestroika and other government policies did not effectively solve the issues at the root of the dissension movements, it eventually succumbed to the weight of its own failings. While perestroika was meant to solve the problems facing the empire, it did not do what it was intended to do and effectively aided in toppling the communist regime because it prolonged the weaknesses which ultimately led the people to overthrow Gorbachev.

The fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1991 drastically altered global relations and the status quo of political institutions of the time. A number of factors played roles of varying degree in bringing about the collapse of the Soviet regime, including the stagnation of the Soviet economy, the conflicting ideologies endorsed by the government, pressures from the West to compete in an arms race,

89 Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 673.

90 Grogin, 328.

91 *Ibid*, 333.

and Gorbachev's ineffective reform policies, specifically perestroika. These factors, when combined, created a situation which the government was totally unable to recover from. The overall weakness of the Soviet Union's economy and perestroika's failure at fixing it doomed the regime. While many factors were involved, perestroika was truly the final straw that sealed the fate of Gorbachev and his government. Although Gorbachev tried to save the system by enacting perestroika, his reforms actually brought about the opposite result. Because the spread of democratic ideals was legalized by Gorbachev's reforms, dissension was allowed to prosper and ultimately brought about the coup that forced the communists out of power.

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