The Collapse of the Soviet Union

**MAIN IDEA**

**REVOLUTION** Democratic reforms brought important changes to the Soviet Union.

**WHY IT MATTERS NOW**

Russia continues to struggle to establish democracy.

**TERMS & NAMES**

- Politburo
- Mikhail Gorbachev
- glasnost
- perestroika
- Boris Yeltsin
- CIS
- “shock therapy”

**SETTING THE STAGE**

After World War II, the Soviet Union and the United States engaged in a Cold War, which you read about in Chapter 17. Each tried to increase its worldwide influence. The Soviet Union extended its power over much of Eastern Europe. By the 1960s, it appeared that communism was permanently established in the region. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet Union’s Communist leadership kept tight control over the Soviet people. But big changes, including democratic reforms, were on the horizon.

**Gorbachev Moves Toward Democracy**

Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev and the Politburo—the ruling committee of the Communist Party—crushed all political disagreement. Censors decided what writers could publish. The Communist Party also restricted freedom of speech and worship. After Brezhnev’s death in 1982, the aging leadership of the Soviet Union tried to hold on to power. However, each of Brezhnev’s two successors died after only about a year in office. Who would succeed them?

**A Younger Leader**

To answer that question, the Politburo debated between two men. One was Mikhail Gorbachev (mih•KYL GAWR•buh•chawf). Gorbachev’s supporters praised his youth, energy, and political skills. With their backing, Gorbachev became the party’s new general secretary. In choosing him, Politburo members did not realize they were unleashing another Russian Revolution.

The Soviet people welcomed Gorbachev’s election. At 54, he was the youngest Soviet leader since Stalin. Gorbachev was only a child during Stalin’s ruthless purge of independent-minded party members. Unlike other Soviet leaders, Gorbachev decided to pursue new ideas.

**Glasnost Promotes Openness**

Past Soviet leaders had created a totalitarian state. It rewarded silence and discouraged individuals from acting on their own. As a result, Soviet society rarely changed, and the Soviet economy stagnated. Gorbachev realized that economic and social reforms could not occur without a free flow of ideas and information. In 1985, he announced a policy known as glasnost (GLAHS•nuhst), or openness.

Glasnost brought remarkable changes. The government allowed churches to open. It released dissidents from prison and allowed the publication of books by previously banned authors. Reporters investigated problems and criticized officials.
Reforming the Economy and Politics

The new openness allowed Soviet citizens to complain about economic problems. Consumers protested that they had to stand in lines to buy food and other basics.

**Economic Restructuring**

Gorbachev blamed these problems on the Soviet Union’s inefficient system of central planning. Under central planning, party officials told farm and factory managers how much to produce. They also told them what wages to pay and what prices to charge. Because individuals could not increase their pay by producing more, they had little motive to improve efficiency.

In 1985, Gorbachev introduced the idea of *perestroika* (pēr•eh•STROY•kuh), or economic restructuring. In 1986, he made changes to revive the Soviet economy. Local managers gained greater authority over their farms and factories, and people were allowed to open small private businesses. Gorbachev’s goal was not to throw out communism, but to make the economic system more efficient and productive.

**Democratization Opens the Political System**

Gorbachev also knew that for the economy to improve, the Communist Party would have to loosen its grip on Soviet society and politics. In 1987, he unveiled a third new policy, called democratization. This would be a gradual opening of the political system.

The plan called for the election of a new legislative body. In the past, voters had merely approved candidates who were handpicked by the Communist Party. Now, voters could choose from a list of candidates for each office. The election produced many surprises. In several places, voters chose lesser-known candidates and reformers over powerful party bosses.

**Foreign Policy**

Soviet foreign policy also changed. To compete militarily with the Soviet Union, President Ronald Reagan had begun the most expensive military buildup in peacetime history, costing more than $2 trillion. Under pressure from U.S. military spending, Gorbachev realized that the Soviet economy could not afford the costly arms race. Arms control became one of Gorbachev’s top priorities. In December 1987, he and Reagan signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. This treaty banned nuclear missiles with ranges of 300 to 3,400 miles.
The Soviet Union Faces Turmoil

Gorbachev’s new thinking led him to support movements for change in both the economic and political systems within the Soviet Union. Powerful forces for democracy were building in the country, and Gorbachev decided not to oppose reform. Glasnost, perestroika, and democratization were all means to reform the system. However, the move to reform the Soviet Union ultimately led to its breakup.

Various nationalities in the Soviet Union began to call for their freedom. More than 100 ethnic groups lived in the Soviet Union. Russians were the largest, most powerful group. However, non-Russians formed a majority in the 14 Soviet republics other than Russia.

Ethnic tensions brewed beneath the surface of Soviet society. As reforms loosened central controls, unrest spread across the country. Nationalist groups in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldavia (now Moldova) demanded self-rule. The Muslim peoples of Soviet Central Asia called for religious freedom.

Lithuania Defies Gorbachev

The first challenge came from the Baltic nations of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia. These republics had been independent states between the two world wars, until the Soviets annexed them in 1940. Fifty years later, in March 1990, Lithuania declared its independence. To try to force it back into the Soviet Union, Gorbachev ordered an economic blockade of the republic.

Although Gorbachev was reluctant to use stronger measures, he feared that Lithuania’s example might encourage other republics to secede. In January 1991, Soviet troops attacked unarmed civilians in Lithuania’s capital. The army killed 14 and wounded hundreds.

Yeltsin Denounces Gorbachev

The assault in Lithuania and the lack of economic progress damaged Gorbachev’s popularity. People looked for leadership to Boris Yeltsin. He was a member of parliament and former mayor of Moscow. Yeltsin criticized the crackdown in Lithuania and the slow pace of reforms. In June 1991, voters chose Yeltsin to become the Russian Federation’s first directly elected president.

In spite of their rivalry, Yeltsin and Gorbachev faced a common enemy in the old guard of Communist officials. Hard-liners—conservatives who opposed reform—were furious that Gorbachev had given up the Soviet Union’s role as the dominant force in Eastern Europe. They also feared losing their power and privileges. These officials vowed to overthrow Gorbachev and undo his reforms.
The August Coup  On August 18, 1991, the hardliners detained Gorbachev at his vacation home on the Black Sea. They demanded his resignation as Soviet president. Early the next day, hundreds of tanks and armored vehicles rolled into Moscow. However, the Soviet people had lost their fear of the party. They were willing to defend their freedoms. Protesters gathered at the Russian parliament building, where Yeltsin had his office.

Around midday, Yeltsin emerged and climbed atop one of the tanks. As his supporters cheered, Yeltsin declared, “We proclaim all decisions and decrees of this committee to be illegal. . . . We appeal to the citizens of Russia to . . . demand a return of the country to normal constitutional developments.”

On August 20, the hardliners ordered troops to attack the parliament building, but they refused. Their refusal turned the tide. On August 21, the military withdrew its forces from Moscow. That night, Gorbachev returned to Moscow.

End of the Soviet Union  The coup attempt sparked anger against the Communist Party. Gorbachev resigned as general secretary of the party. The Soviet parliament voted to stop all party activities. Having first seized power in 1917 in a coup that succeeded, the Communist Party now collapsed because of a coup that failed.

The coup also played a decisive role in accelerating the breakup of the Soviet Union. Estonia and Latvia quickly declared their independence. Other republics soon followed. Although Gorbachev pleaded for unity, no one was listening. By early December, all 15 republics had declared independence.

Yeltsin met with the leaders of other republics to chart a new course. They agreed to form the Commonwealth of Independent States, or CIS, a loose federation of former Soviet territories. Only the Baltic republics and Georgia declined to
join. The formation of the CIS meant the death of the Soviet Union. On Christmas Day 1991, Gorbachev announced his resignation as president of the Soviet Union, a country that ceased to exist.

**Russia Under Boris Yeltsin**

As president of the large Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin was now the most powerful figure in the CIS. He would face many problems, including an ailing economy, tough political opposition, and an unpopular war.

**Yeltsin Faces Problems** One of Yeltsin’s goals was to reform the Russian economy. He adopted a bold plan known as “shock therapy,” an abrupt shift to free-market economics. Yeltsin lowered trade barriers, removed price controls, and ended subsidies to state-owned industries.

Initially, the plan produced more shock than therapy. Prices soared; from 1992 to 1994, the inflation rate averaged 800 percent. Many factories dependent on government money had to cut production or shut down entirely. This forced thousands of people out of work. By 1993, most Russians were suffering economic hardship:

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

A visitor to Moscow cannot escape the feeling of a society in collapse. Child beggars accost foreigners on the street. . . . Children ask why they should stay in school when educated professionals do not make enough money to survive. . . . A garment worker complains that now her wages do not cover even the food bills, while fear of growing crime makes her dread leaving home.

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**DAVID M. KOTZ, “The Cure That Could Kill”**

Economic problems fueled a political crisis. In October 1993, legislators opposed to Yeltsin’s policies shut themselves inside the parliament building. Yeltsin ordered troops to bombard the building, forcing hundreds of rebel legislators to surrender. Many were killed. Opponents accused Yeltsin of acting like a dictator.

**Chechnya Rebels** Yeltsin’s troubles included war in Chechnya (CHEHCH•nee•uh), a largely Muslim area in southwestern Russia. In 1991, Chechnya declared its independence, but Yeltsin denied the region’s right to secede. In 1994, he ordered 40,000 Russian troops into the breakaway republic. Russian forces reduced the capital city of Grozny (GROHZ•nee) to rubble. News of the death and destruction sparked anger throughout Russia.

With an election coming, Yeltsin sought to end the war. In August 1996, the two sides signed a cease-fire. That year, Yeltsin won reelection. War soon broke out again between Russia and Chechnya, however. In 1999, as the fighting raged, Yeltsin resigned and named Vladimir Putin as acting president.
Russia Under Vladimir Putin

Putin forcefully dealt with the rebellion in Chechnya—a popular move that helped him win the presidential election in 2000. Nonetheless, the fighting in the region dragged on for years.

Troubles Continue in Chechnya  In 2002, Russia said that the war in Chechnya was nearing an end. In July 2002, the Kremlin said it would begin pulling some of its 80,000 troops out of Chechnya, but Russia had made and broken such a promise before. Then, in October 2002, Chechen rebels seized a theater in Moscow, and more than 150 people died in the rescue attempt by Russian forces.

Economic, Political, and Social Problems  The nation’s economic problems continued, and some observers wondered whether Russian democracy could survive. A decade of change and reform between 1992 and 2002 caused enormous social upheaval in Russia. Experts estimated that there were between 30,000 and 50,000 homeless children on the streets of Moscow. About half of these children were younger than 13. Other indications of a society experiencing severe stress included high rates of domestic violence and unemployment, a steep population decline, and declines in the standard of living and the average life expectancy.

Nonetheless, there were some signs of improvement under Putin. He stated that he favored a market economy, but one adapted to Russia’s special circumstances. Unrest in the Soviet Union had an enormous impact on Central and Eastern Europe, as you will read in the next section.

INTERNET ACTIVITY
Use the Internet to research the situation in Chechnya today. Make a poster that includes a time line of the conflict, the leaders of the two sides, and war images. (CST 3)