

Internal factors: the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union

Structural problems in the Soviet system

(Among the most striking features of communism's collapse was its suddenness, a surprise as much to most Western experts on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as to political leaders and the public.) One Western Soviet expert, whose views are fairly representative, wrote in a study published in 1986, that 'it

is unlikely that the [Soviet] state is now, or will be in the late 1980s, in danger of social or political disintegration. Thus we must study the factors which made the regime stable in the post-Stalin era and are still at work at the present' (Bialer 1986: 19). It is true that revolutionary change by its nature contains a large element of the incalculable. Institutional inertia, social customs, and psychological habit ensure that systems can maintain their outer shapes long after they have begun to decay internally. Perhaps the

most useful general observation on the causes of revolution remains that of the French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville: that 'the most dangerous moment for a bad government is generally that in which it sets about reform' (Tocqueville 1933: 186). This model, generalized as it is, is a useful starting point for an understanding of Mikhail Gorbachev's revolutionary period in power.

(Gorbachev's accession to power in March 1985 was itself an event of considerable significance.) He was the first General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party to have reached maturity after the Second World War. He had little adult experience of the Stalinist period and was less beholden to the Stalinist legacy than his predecessors. He had been appointed to the ruling Politburo as recently as 1978 towards the end of the era of stagnation under Brezhnev. In projecting a new dynamism as a representative of the rising class of educated professionals, he presented a striking contrast to the ageing and intellectually stultified leaders of the Brezhnev period. His path to leadership was not immediate on Brezhnev's death. Following the latter's death in 1982 an interregnum ensued during which first Yuri Andropov and then Konstantin Chernenko were appointed and died in each case within little more than a year in office. (The passing of the old guard, combined with Gorbachev's power base among advocates of change, which enabled him to make key changes in personnel, conveyed the sense that Gorbachev was inaugurating a new era in Soviet history.

Crucially, however, it was evidently not his intention to dismantle the Soviet Union. His widely read political credo, *Perestroika* (1988), was firmly anti-Stalinist but not anti-socialist. 'Through *perestroika* and *glasnost*,' he wrote, 'the ideals of socialism will gain fresh impetus'; and they would do so through a return to the ideals of Lenin who 'lives on in the minds and hearts of millions of people' (Gorbachev 1988: 131; 25). (Indeed the sense of renewal which Gorbachev projected did not seem to presage the end of the cold war. On the contrary, it was felt by many on the Right in the United States that a reinvigorated Soviet Union would present a more severe challenge to the West than the old sclerotic leadership.)

How, then, are we to explain the transformation of the next few years? We can usefully distinguish between long-term and short-term causes. (The chief

Box 5.1 Change in the Soviet Union

1985 March	On the death of Konstantin Chernenko, Mikhail Gorbachev becomes General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party
1987	Publication of Gorbachev's book <i>Perestroika</i> .
1988 April	The Soviet Union undertakes to withdraw troops from Afghanistan by February 1989; in October Gorbachev becomes President of the USSR, replacing Andrei Gromyko.
1989 March	Elections held for the Congress of People's Deputies
1990 March	Congress of People's Deputies abolishes the leading role of the Communist Party; Lithuania declares independence from the USSR.
1991 Aug.	Coup against Gorbachev.
1991 Dec.	USSR ceases to exist and CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) comes into being.

long-term problem was economic, though arguably it had political roots, in that economic policies and practices were dictated by political ideology. Structural weaknesses were built into the system of the command economy which relied on inflexible central planning, rewarded gross output of goods rather than productivity, and offered disincentives to innovation in management and production techniques.) In place of a market relation between consumer demand and supply, from the late 1920s the centre dictated what kinds of goods should be produced and at what prices, according pre-eminence to heavy industrial production with a view to forced-marching the Soviet economy into the twentieth century. Arguably, this approach succeeded up to a point; the Soviet Union's ability to withstand Germany's onslaught in 1941 and ultimately to defeat the Third Reich owed a good deal to the brutal pace at which Stalin pushed the Soviet economy and the Soviet people in the 1930s. Such success came at

enormous human cost and at the cost of entrenching the primacy of heavy industry in Soviet economic thinking far beyond the point of utility. That point was reached somewhere in the 1970s when the computer and automation revolution overtook the West but virtually bypassed the Soviet Union except in the military sector. Even there the Soviet Union found it hard to keep pace with the West (Dibb 1988: 266). Furthermore, agriculture was a notoriously weak sector of the Soviet economy. In agriculture, as in industry, central planning stifled productivity and promoted inflexible practices.

These problems were systemic and of long standing. If so, why was the Soviet Union able to survive so long and why did these problems become critical in the 1980s? The answers to both questions have political as well as economic components. Survival was possible economically because, as mentioned above, the Soviet economy performed well in certain fields such as the production of heavy industrial goods and military equipment. It also had large reserves of oil which could be sold for hard currency. Politically, the legacy of discipline and repression supplied by the Communist Party served to stifle dissent and more positively to promote an ethos of collective sacrifice such as is undertaken by governments in wartime. Indeed, the Soviet system could be described as essentially a war economy. (As for the question of why conditions became critical in the 1980s, economically, as we have seen, the failure to modernize in line with the West was of paramount importance. Furthermore, a serious decline in harvests in the late 1970s and a slow-down in production in some key industries suggested a general climate of economic stagnation. Commentary also began to appear in the West during the early 1980s on a decline in general health in the Soviet Union, rising death rates and infant mortality rates (Hobsbawm 1994: 472).

The effects of Gorbachev's reforms: *glasnost* and political restructuring

However, even these problems might not have been critical, given the capacity of the Soviet system to sustain itself despite handicaps. It took specific ini-

tiatives by Gorbachev to turn these systemic problems into a systemic crisis. The first of these initiatives was the decision to permit dissemination of knowledge about the realities of Soviet life (*glasnost* or 'openness'), the second and third were political and economic restructuring (*perestroika*). Elements of these programmes had been present in previous reform efforts in the Soviet Union, for example during the Khrushchev period. If there was one element which differentiated Gorbachev's approach from that of his predecessors it was his conviction that consent rather than coercion should, as far as possible, guide implementation of these changes.

Glasnost was in one sense the old communist tradition of self-criticism writ large. The difference was that *glasnost* was less purely ritualistic, less hedged around with restrictions, and more open-ended than the usual forms of self-criticism which took place in the pages of *Pravda* and similar publications. Designed to purify and cleanse rather than destroy, to serve as a means of gaining public support for Gorbachev's reforms rather than as a vehicle for attacks on the system itself, *glasnost* quickly exceeded the bounds set for it. Once controls on the press, radio, television, and the film industry were loosened, control of public opinion began to slip from Gorbachev's grasp. (Indeed only now could one begin to speak of public opinion in the Soviet Union.) Freedom of expression gave a voice to those

Box 5.2 Internal causes of the collapse of Soviet communism

Long-term causes

- structural weaknesses in the economy, including:
- inflexible central planning system
- inability to modernize
- inefficiency and absence of incentives in agricultural production

Short-term causes

- economic stagnation in the 1970s and 1980s
- poor harvests in the late 1970s and early 1980s
- Gorbachev's political and economic reforms

who opposed Gorbachev as well as to those who wanted to go farther and faster than he did. While *glasnost* did not of itself create opposition parties, the logic of *glasnost* was ultimately to undermine the fundamental principle of the Party's leading role. Although the Party's privileged position, guaranteed by Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution, was not abolished until 1990, a sequence of reforms, culminating in major changes proposed at the 19th Party Congress in June 1988, effected a fundamental shift in the balance of political forces with the Soviet state. Perhaps it would be truer to say that in these reforms Gorbachev was acknowledging the existence of a newly emerging civil society distinct from the interest of the Communist Party and the government.)

Gorbachev's major proposal was for a new legislature, only one-third of whose delegates would be reserved for the Communist Party and its affiliated organizations. The other delegates to the Congress of People's Deputies, as the new body was known, would be directly elected on the basis of popular choice. At a stroke, following the elections of 1989, the political system was transformed by the entry into public life of a mass of new participants, a large proportion of whom were not beholden to the Communist Party. Indeed huge numbers of Communist candidates were defeated. The first meeting of the Congress in May 1989 has been described as 'the most momentous event in the Soviet Union since the 1917 Revolution'. There took place 'a whirlwind of free debate that scattered every known communist taboo' (Roxburgh 1991: 135).

The other major element of political restructuring was the creation of an executive presidency, a post for which Gorbachev insisted he be allowed to stand unopposed. His aim was to maintain a grip on the direction of change, but it was inevitable that his critics, and even some of his supporters, should note the irony of a leader who preached democracy but claimed the right to stand above it himself. Arguably, however, Gorbachev's pursuit of reform from the top down, self-serving though it was, was both very much in the Russian/Soviet tradition and understandable in a country which was subject to growing splits. The erosion of the integrative force of the Communist Party transformed the dynamics of the political institutions at the centre but also threatened the structure of the Soviet Union itself.)

Box 5.3 Essentials of *glasnost* and *perestroika*

Essentials of *glasnost* (openness)

- promotion of principle of freedom to criticize
- loosening of controls on media and publishing
- freedom of worship

Essentials of *perestroika* (restructuring)

- new legislature, two-thirds of which was to be elected on the basis of popular choice (i.e. allowing non-communists to be elected).
- creation of an executive presidency.
- ending of the 'leading role' of the Communist Party.
- Enterprise Law, allowing state enterprises to sell part of their product on the open market.
- Joint Ventures Law, allowing foreign companies to own Soviet enterprises.

The collapse of the Soviet empire

A multi-ethnic, multilingual entity, composed of fifteen 'autonomous' republics and numerous sub-units within them, the Soviet Union was in all but name an empire, held together by powerful central institutions, pressure for ideological conformity, and the threat of force. The Communist Party played a key role in each of these areas and the erosion of the Party's power released aspirations for freedom which had been suppressed but not destroyed by seventy years of Soviet rule. Demands for independence came in particular from the Baltic republics, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and from Georgia, but the power of example supplied by these movements affected virtually all the Soviet republics. A more tangled and bloody conflict arose in Azerbaijan, resulting from the desire of Armenians in Ngorny Karabakh (an Armenian region administered by Azerbaijan) for incorporation into the Soviet Republic of Armenia.

For the purposes of understanding the collapse of Soviet rule, two points are important about these events:

1. The 'nationalities question' was evidently a blind spot of Mikhail Gorbachev's. He was noticeably unsympathetic to their demands and, though keen to maintain his credibility as a liberal by claiming that the more violent attempts to suppress nationalism in the republics had been undertaken without his orders, he insisted that Moscow could not countenance secession.
2. However, when faced with the reality of secessionist actions (above all in the Baltic republics), he was unwilling in practice to use the full force of Soviet military power to suppress them. The result was that Gorbachev succeeded in alienating both liberals, who argued that Russia should not stand in the way of independence movements, and conservatives, who saw in Gorbachev's concessions to nationalism a betrayal of the integrity of the Soviet Union.

(During 1990 and 1991 Gorbachev oscillated between trying to satisfy conservatives and liberals. To the former he promised suppression of nationalism by force. Swinging to the latter in the early months of 1991, he announced a proposal for a new 'Union treaty' which would devolve power substantially to the Soviet republics. It was this move which provoked conservatives to mount the coup of August 1991, during which Gorbachev was held for several days in the Crimea, while Boris Yeltsin defied the coup plotters in Moscow and thus laid the basis for his subsequent career as President of Russia. The coup's failure did not, contrary to Gorbachev's hopes and expectations, restore his position and status in the eyes of the Soviet people, not least because it was felt that Gorbachev's indulgence of the Right had helped to make the coup attempt possible. Furthermore, Gorbachev seemed unaware of how far public opinion had moved under the stimulus of the movement he had set in motion. In a press conference on his return to Moscow after the coup, he continued to defend the Communist Party. He seemed clearly yesterday's man. Within a few months the logic of *perestroika* and nationalism was followed through with the dismantling of the Soviet Union and its replacement by a loose Confederation of Independent States (CIS).

Economic restructuring

Economic restructuring in a sense cannot be separated from politics since, as was suggested above, under the Soviet system economics like all areas of social life was subject to a political and ideologically derived rationale. Nevertheless, economic initiatives were important in their own right under Gorbachev, in that their goal was precisely to effect a separation of the economic from the political, or at least to go some way in that direction. Real changes began in 1987 with the legalization (within clearly specified limits) of private farming and business co-operatives. A year later the Enterprise Law granted limited freedom to managers of state enterprises to sell a proportion of their products on the open market rather than, as had been the practice, having to sell all of it to the government (Goldman 1992: 111-17).

In all these measures there was a partial move towards a free market or, more precisely, an attempt to straddle the gap between the stifling command economy and an incentive-led market system. In the sphere of foreign economic policy, a new law on Joint Ventures allowed foreign companies ownership of enterprises in the Soviet Union (initially 49 per cent and then, following amendment in 1990, 100 per cent). This was a huge innovation for an economy which had generally sought to insulate itself from capitalism. Such trade as had taken place with the West had been tightly controlled by the Ministry of Foreign Trade. Now individual companies could make their own arrangements (Hough 1988: 66-72).

The effect of these economic changes was catastrophic. The reforms managed to cut the ground from under the old system without putting in its place viable new economic mechanisms. State planning was in abeyance but there was no fully operating market mechanism in its place; price levels were inconsistent, some reflecting the input of government subsidies and some reflecting what consumers would pay. Inflation, shortages, and declining production were the harvest of five years of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. To these could be added rising crime rates, a sense of social disarray, and a general feeling of uncertainty about the future. By the time Gorbachev left office in 1991 much of the exhilaration which had attended the liberation from communist

oppression had been expended. Destructuring perhaps inevitably proved easier than restructuring. That this was to remain a continuing problem is evident in the efforts of Gorbachev's successor, Boris Yeltsin, to make the transition to a market economy during 1992–3 by means of 'shock therapy', the result of which was rampant inflation (Phillips 2000: 123–8).

✓ Key points

- The suddenness of the collapse of communism defied the predictions of experts.
- Gorbachev's accession to power represented the advent of a new generation in the Soviet leadership, though Gorbachev gave little indication early on that he would break the mould of Soviet politics.
- The Soviet Union suffered from systemic economic problems which were compounded in the 1980s by poor harvests and a failure to meet the challenge of the computer revolution.
- *Glasnost* began with relaxation of censorship which Gorbachev hoped to be able to control, but the process soon eluded his grasp as something approaching a genuine public opinion emerged.
- A combination of *glasnost* and political restructuring undermined the role of the Communist Party and ultimately the Soviet Union itself which by the end of 1991 had dissolved into separate republics.
- Economic restructuring had the effect of destroying the rationale of the old system without putting viable new mechanisms in its place.