

STUDENT NAME

COURSE NAME

PROFESSOR NAME

DATE

Collapse: The End of the Soviet Union

Of the three primary events of the 20th century, two may be seen in the world wars. The third is the collapse of the Soviet Union. Founded in 1917 and in various states of conflict throughout the entirety of its existence, the USSR came to define much of the 20th century in tandem with the United States. These two, as enmeshed in a Cold War, consistently acted in the interest of oppressing the other, and this action occurred on a global scale. Thus, the fall of the Soviet Union had global implications and remains an important event to analyze. From this, the expository aim of this paper is to show how the dissolution of the Soviet Union occurred, and that

based in economic woes, cultural conflicts, and the exacerbating element of the Afghanistan War.

When considering this dissolution, one may find it easy to consider the collapse to be rooted in the economic. However, when analyzing the economic difficulties of the Soviet Union, one must look to two separate contexts. The first of these is the theoretical and historical background that the Soviet economy was rooted in; the second, the course of that economy as it relates to the collapse of the USSR. When examining, firstly, the theoretical and historical base of the USSR, one must look to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the ideology that motivated this. The revolutionaries who enacted this revolution and deposed the brutal czarist government

were Marxists; they were also the proponents of a number of sub-theories, such as Leninism, Trotskyism, and Stalinism, all of which proposed alternative courses for the newly-socialist country (Cohen 99).

The key issue in these ideologies revolved around the nature of their socialism in light of Russia's material capabilities. At the time of the revolution, Russia was in a pitiful state, with some estimates placing it hundreds of years behind the rest of Europe in terms of economic development; this posed a problem for the development of socialism, which, in all Marxist views, required capitalist levels of development to build off of (101). Because this was impossible in the case of Russia – quite simply, the material capacity was not there after the

revolution – the challenge for those building the new economy was what to do with the surplus labor force. Some theoretical bases, such as Leninism and Trotskyism, understood an international wave of revolution and subsequent aid from these other socialist countries to Russia as critical. When this did not occur after a failed German attempt at socialist revolution in 1919, the theoretical base of Stalinism came to develop an understanding of building socialism in a single nation. This required costly, oppressive economic reforms that, after two decades of mutation and a horrific world war, left the Russian economic project in a vastly deformed state.

Understanding this development of the Soviet economy is critical in understanding its eventual dissolution, because it is here that one derives the prerequisite understanding of its nature. It was, in all senses, doomed to fail, even in the view of some revolutionaries who tried to build it (104).

When evaluating the Soviet Union towards the end of its existence, one can see the effects of its mutated, deformed socialism. By the late-1970s, economic growth in the USSR had reached a halt, and initial calls for action were ignored (Pomfret 42). While reformers began to

appear in government in the early-1980s, no concrete action was taken on the whole until later in the decade – by this point, stagnation had firmly set in, and the adverse effects of a poorly-performing economy had taken root. Limited reforms were attempted in some non-Russian republics within the Union, though all measures before perestroika proved wholly ineffective. This was reflected in the continuing rise of inflation, which increased by a minimum of ten percent from year to year at the end of the 1980s. Throughout this period, government spending on the military continued to increase (43-44).

When perestroika – that is, the introduction of limited market elements in the Soviet economy – began, it, too, faced extreme difficulties. The deformed socialism of the USSR had devolved into a firm “command administrative” economy, which necessitated state planning. This measure, which required artificially low prices of over 7 million products, failed dramatically, and led to widespread shortages (Hill 39-40). Protests and strikes erupted as a result, which only worsened the already flagging Soviet economy. Additionally, debates around economic policy throughout this chaos only grew increasingly radicalized, and were marked by polarization between reformers and decision-making bodies (Pomfret 44). As one could conclude from the very origins of the Soviet economy, any decision that could be made would be too little, too late.

When considering this economic impact, there is notation of increased spending on the Soviet military. This ties into the military conflict of the period that exacerbated the aforementioned economic issues, and one that substantially impacted the culture of the USSR. This would be the Soviet war in Afghanistan; if a single event could be isolated as the beginning of the end, it would be this war. In examining this, one must understand what the Soviets were doing there, and, from this, note the more clearly delineated effects it had.

To begin: in 1978, a socialist faction within the Afghan government took power via a coup. Already in a fragile position, the Iranian revolution in 1979 further complicated the issues of the new Afghani government, as it emboldened the waves of religious radical combatants feared to challenge the fledgling state. That same year, the Soviet Union chose to invade; the given pretense for the invasion being the Soviet interest in supporting a fellow socialist state. The underlying reasons for this invasion, however, may have lied more in Soviet security interests (Collins 198-199). If such was the case, then, the invasion proved to secure the opposite for the USSR, and only created more problems – some of which were so severe that they led to its eventual collapse.

The war itself lasted approximately a decade, mirroring in some ways the United States' war in Afghanistan for a period. Roughly half of the war was spent in various states of attrition. However, in the mid-1980s, Western support for the Mujahideen – the Islamic militants fighting the Afghan government and Soviet forces – readjusted the scales and saw the Soviet forces losing ground (Reuveny & Prakash 697). This continued until the late 1980s, when the USSR finally withdrew the last of its forces from the country.

The effects that this conflict had on Soviet society cannot be understated. When viewed contextually, the war cannot be seen, then, as a cause of collapse in its own right, but as an event that enabled and exacerbated the underlying causes that did lead to such dissolution. Perhaps the most important links between the war and the aforementioned processes – the effects of glasnost and perestroika, in effect – may be seen in the consequential perceptions of the Soviet military flowing from the war (Reuveny & Prakash 694). In particular, these perceptions impacted the independence aims of non-Russian countries in the USSR, and, even in Russia, veterans of this conflict helped exacerbate cultural resistance to the Soviet state.

Such may be observed in the vast cultural shifts occurring in the USSR. These can be characterized as a number of separate phenomena, such as the withering of party-culture and internal conflicts regarding the narrative of the country's future. Also notable in this context was the rise of ethnic nationalism in the non-Russian republics.

This first note, that of cultural changes in perceptions of the party, can be directly linked to glasnost, which was an attempt at cultural liberalization to accompany perestroika. Whereas party officials were previously to not be reported on, the press now had the ability to expose elements of government corruption. Such was seen as highly culturally relevant against the backdrop of the economic difficulties of the period, and reports on corruption were widely received. These served to further a sense of mistrust in the party, who were already distrusted and suspicious of their leaders (Hill 31). Accompanying this, and furthering that mistrust were the Afghani, previously mentioned in discussion of the war. This term refers to wounded veterans of the conflict in Afghanistan, who began appearing in major cities

increasing concentration as more and more soldiers were harmed. These men were testaments to the failures of the Soviet government and its lack of credibility, as, officially speaking, party line denied the existence of a war in Afghanistan at all; the medical treatment these men received upon their return was, too, entirely insufficient (Reuveny & Prakash 699). While outspoken in their own right and vocal critics of the Soviet state, the mere presence of the Afghani furthered the cultural perception of the USSR as a dishonest, corrupt machine.

Additionally, there was the element of distinct narratives that exacerbated this cultural turbulence. While many Soviet citizens were sympathetic to the aforementioned arguments against their government, a vocal portion of the populace were critical on different grounds. These critics, largely comprised of older citizens and orthodox Soviets, characterized any attempt

at economic reform as a betrayal of their country's principles, and as a slight against the suffering of those who industrialized the country in the 1930s, those who fought in the Second World War, and those who professed their solidarity with anti-colonial struggle around the world (Hill 40-41). While this line of critique is notably flawed, it serves to demonstrate that citizens of all perspectives, be they liberal youth or unrepentant Stalinists, were dissatisfied with and distrustful of their government.

Of the most direct correlation to this ultimate dissolution, however, was the rise of ethnic nationalism in the non-Russian republics. Against the backdrop of this wave of critique and skepticism, secessionist elements were emboldened to argue their case (Reuveny & Prakash

695). In one comes this perspective, based on glasnost and the effects of the Afghanistan war, it could be seen how

SAMPLE

“...non-Russian minorities, Asian as well as European, resented the Russian

'capture' of the system. The Afghanistan war accentuated such resentments, since the non-Russian Soviet republics perceived it as a Russian war fought by non-Russian soldiers. [...] The war therefore seriously eroded the legitimacy of the Soviet system and encouraged secession by the non-Russian republics. It alienated both elites and masses and gave the secessionist movements a popular rallying cause against Russian domination,” (704).

With this rallying cry, there was, too, evidence of the Soviet military's weakness. This became critical in bolstering secessionist movements, as the military had, up to that point, served as a

widely deterrent force on independence. The invasions of Czechoslovakia and Hungary decades earlier illustrated this – that, in the face of losing a republic or satellite state, the USSR would respond with quick brutality to maintain their hold. However, the failure of the government to address the economic issues of the 1980s made the USSR, as a political entity, seem weak; indeed, the inability of the country to win a war against non-state insurgents in Afghanistan furthered this view (693).

Ultimately, these three factors coalesced into the climactic event of collapse. In 1991, the cultural question of secession were addressed in referendums. The mistrust of the state, still very much based in economic strife and in the shadow of the war, only recently ended, was translated into the election of a Russian president, Gorbachev (Hill 201). With all individual regions beginning to exercise degrees of autonomy, the entity of the Soviet Union itself began to slow in its function. The increased autonomy of various republics culminated in declarations of their independence from the USSR, as seen in Ukraine and Belorussia; the Soviet state apparatus was on its last legs, and, in late 1991, was dissolved.

SAMPLE

WORKS CITED

Cohen, G. A. Marxism After the Collapse of the Soviet Union. *The Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1999, pp. 99-104.

Collins, Joseph. Soviet Policy Toward Afghanistan. *Soviet Foreign Policy*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 1987, pp. 198-210.

Hill, Ron. The Collapse of the Soviet Union. *History Ireland*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2005, pp. 37-42.

Pomfret, Richard. "The Economic and Political Collapse of the Soviet Union." *The Economies of Central Asia*. Princeton University Press. 1995.

Reuveny, Rafael and Aseem Prakash. The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union. *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1999, pp. 693-708.

SAMPLE