

Lectures on Russian History - Soviet Russia

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The Second Revolution (October 1917)

- "Bolshevik" in Russian means "Member of the Majority," but this in fact was not the case during 1917.
- Lenin's party represented only a small constituency in 1917, which is why they had to take over the government by force.
- Contrary to popular belief, there was no storming of the Winter Palace, but rather an occupation of the Winter Palace by a few people. In reality most people even in Petrograd, much less the rest of Russia, did not even know for some time that there had been a change in government.
- Again, it is a mistake to think that the revolution was a popular uprising. Richard Pipes writes:
- "There exists a widespread impression that before 1917 Russia was a 'feudal' country in which the Imperial court, the Church, and a small minority of wealthy nobles owned the bulk of the land, while the peasants either cultivated small plots or worked as tenant farmers. This condition is believed to have been a prime cause of the Revolution. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth; the image derives from conditions in pre-1789 France, where, indeed, the vast majority of peasants tilled the land of others ... [b]y 1905, peasant cultivators owned, either communally or privately, 61.8 percent of the land in private possession in Russia ... and in 1916, on the eve of the Revolution, peasant cultivators in European Russia owned nine-tenths of the land" (Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 100).
- The legend of the storming of the palace by huge crowds of workers and peasants was perpetuated by the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, who portrayed such events in one of his films
- Many people wrongly thought that this film was a documentary taken at the time of the uprising
- Lenin and his confederates did take control of the organs of government in Petrograd.
- Pipes writes: "[W]hat occurred in October 1917 was a classical modern coup d'état accomplished without mass support. It was a surreptitious seizure of the nerve centers of the modern state, carried out under false slogans in order to neutralize the population at large, the true purpose of which was revealed only after the new claimants to power were firmly in the saddle" (60).

- Lenin and the Bolsheviks signed a treaty at Brest-Litovsk (in present-day Belarus), took the Russians out of the war, and began the process of nationalizing the land and private industry
- Among the first acts of the Bolsheviks was to imprison and execute all members of the royal family, including the princess Anastasia (as DNA evidence now shows), in the city of Ekaterinburg in the Ural Mountains.

The Civil War and Peasant Wars (1917-1921)

- There was opposition to the new government
- This opposition, sometimes known collectively as the "Whites" (The Bolsheviks were the "Reds"), was formidable, but disorganized, primarily because the ranks of the army were severely depleted by massive Russian losses during World War I
- Chief opposition came from the peasants, who opposed Bolshevik rule and in some areas mounted resistance that claimed several hundred thousand lives on both sides
- Ultimately the new government prevailed after fighting a civil war until 1921 against the variety of forces that opposed it
- During and immediately after the civil war, the Bolsheviks, contrary to their stated goal of a representative government of workers and peasants, established a one-party government not subject to elections, led by long-time party members and enforced by the Red Army and the secret police
- As the historian Sean McMeekin documents in his 2009 book *History's Greatest Heist*, the Bolsheviks nationalized all banks, appropriated all property private property held in safe deposit boxes and private accounts, took over companies and land.
- This process was called "War Communism"
- The new government nationalized agriculture and industry, seized grain and other produce from the peasants, eliminated political opponents, enforced martial law, and undertook the subjugation of Russian culture in all its forms
- Among their first acts, as we now know from archival material released since the end of the Soviet period, was the arrest and execution of several thousand priests in accordance with a memorandum issued by Lenin.
- The campaign against priests and the church was slowed after this initial onslaught, because Lenin knew that this campaign would arouse the most hostility among the populace – more than the loss of their own property or the dissolution of the legal government of Russia.

- Another of their early acts was to establish a prison camp on Solovetskii Island in the far north of European Russia.
- This was the first in what would become a vast networks of prison camps in northern Russia and Siberia that would come to be called by the acronym GULag.
- The Bolsheviks enacted a program of what has been called the Red Terror, whereby real or potential (or imagined) opponents of the new government were arrested and summarily executed.
- The leader who carried out many of these policies, especially as Lenin's health began to fail, was one of his confederates in the Bolshevik party, Lev Trotsky.
- The organization that was formed to carry it out, the secret police, was called the Cheka, the forerunner of many similar organizations with different names (including, later, the KGB).
- The immediate result of all this activity, in the years 1921-1922, was what the historian Catherine Merridale calls "the first great famine of the Soviet era" (*Night of Stone* 161), resulting in several millions of deaths either from starvation or resulting typhus and cholera. Richard Pipes (*Concise History* 360) puts the figure at 5.1 million and refers to this famine as "the greatest human disaster, other than those caused by war, since the Black Death of the 14th century."
- At was at this time that Lenin resumed the campaign against the church
- MacMeekin (82) quotes Lenin: "It is now and only now, when in the famine regions there is cannibalism, and the roads were littered with hundreds if not thousands of corpses, that we can (and therefore must) carry through the confiscation of church valuables with the most rabid and merciless energy, stopping at nothing in suppressing all resistance."
- The famine was finally alleviated, in large measure, by the United States government. An organization called the American Relief Administration, headed by then commerce secretary (later President) Herbert Hoover, provided aid that fed 11 million persons a day and probably saved 9 million from death (Pipes, *Concise History* 359-60; see also a recent PBS documentary film, *The Great Famine*).
- The aid was finally curtailed when the Soviet government began selling some of the food abroad to raise money for its own purposes.

The NEP period

- As a result of the civil war, abrupt changes and resulting famine, the Soviet Union in early 1921 was in danger of collapse

- Lenin reacted by instituting the New Economic Policy or NEP, which allowed some private enterprise, including the sale and barter of agricultural produce
- After disastrous harvests early in the twenties, there were, in fact, several normal harvests, and the ability to sell the surplus encouraged higher production
- For a brief time it appeared that there could be a return to normal life
- This helped to save the Bolshevik government

The Immigration

- As a result of the revolution and civil war, as many as three million Russians, correctly fearing what would happen to them if they remained, left the country
- Because they were prosperous in the pre-war period, or had opposed the Bolsheviks, or were intellectuals who could not be counted on to support the new government wholeheartedly, they would have been executed
- We are concerned here with what would later be called the "First Wave" of twentieth century Russian emigration
- The waves are 1919-1939; post-1945; The 1970s; and Post-1991 (although it is not a wave of emigration in the same sense of no return)
- A few of these émigrés left immediately after the revolution but most went first to the Crimea, which was the last bastion of anti-Soviet forces.
- Some also left through Eastern Europe or Siberia.
- All classes were represented, since many peasants served in the White army
- Peasants, however, made up a smaller proportion of the larger group than they had in Russia, where they were by far the numerically dominant group.
- The émigrés' level of education was higher than Russian society as a whole in Russia at the time of the revolution, which was a factor in the émigrés' efforts to preserve and promote Russian culture abroad.
- There were more young men than any other group, because many were ex-soldiers
- Many military units emigrated together
- Many Cossack units emigrated together, some to agricultural regions in Eastern Europe where for a time they were able to resume their traditional lifestyle
- The soldiers believed, as all Russian émigrés originally believed, that they would return shortly
- Most were Eastern Orthodox Christians but all other groups were represented

- Politically, the émigrés ranged from monarchist to socialist
- All were united by their opposition to the Soviet Union but their differences made unified action impossible, as it had in Russia during the Civil War
- The localities included Istanbul (first stop for many émigrés), various Eastern European cities, Berlin, and finally Paris which (before the Nazis) became the capital and cultural center of Russia Abroad.
- Some émigrés took the eastern route through Siberia to the Chinese city of Kharbin, and from there, in some cases, to the United States.
- The earliest émigrés resisted what they referred to as "denationalization," i. e., assimilation into the host culture, primarily for two reasons:
 - They believed they were going back and therefore need not assimilate into the "host culture"
 - They believed that Russian émigré society was the true repository of Russian culture
- There is a great deal of justification for this view.
- The émigrés fought to preserve the Russian language from what they saw as its deterioration in the Soviet Union
- They formed their own churches, Russian schools, scouting organizations, veterans' associations, social clubs, businesses, and political parties
- They attempted to further all phases of Russian art and culture
- They produced the greatest Russian literature of the 20th century, including the work of Ivan Bunin (1870-1953), who in 1933 became the first Russian to win the Nobel Prize in literature, and Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), who wrote several novels about the Russian emigration but then moved to the US, switched to English, and became famous for writing a book called Lolita
- Ultimately, three historical phenomena led to the assimilation of the émigrés, further emigration to places like Australia and the United States, and general loss of a sense of community:
 - Old age and death (since many were elderly and all had endured tremendous physical and emotional difficulties)
 - The gradual recognition of the Soviet Union by European countries, with a concurrent loss of legal status by the émigrés.
 - The rise of the Nazis and the beginning of World War II

The Death of Lenin

- In 1922 Lenin suffered the first of three strokes which would lead to his death in January of 1924
- A power struggle among leading party members, and in particular the Politburo, a three-member ruling clique, ensued, with Josef Stalin, a Georgian (real name: Dzhugashvili) consolidating power by 1928.

Joseph Stalin (Ruled 1928-1953)

- Stalin was a former seminary student who joined the revolutionary movement around the turn of the century
- He was not Russian – he was from Georgia, then a subject of the Russian Empire, and his real name was Dzhugashvili
- His chief activity was "expropriations" -- bank robberies to fund the movement
- After the revolution in the 1920s he was the party leader responsible for nationalities policy -- policy toward non-Russian regions of the Russian empire
- The Bolsheviks had suggested before the revolution that these people, in places like Chechnya, would be granted national self-determination if they desired it, but this didn't happen
- In fact, national minorities were treated much worse under Stalin than they had been during tsarist times
- It is not clear when Stalin finally consolidated power, but it was no later than 1928 and probably somewhat earlier
- His 25-year reign claimed more lives than even the Germans in World War II.
- In fact, many historians place the total number of deaths in the Soviet Union due to Stalin's policies and actions at 50 million or more

The dekulakization and collectivization of agriculture

- Stalin's most radical policy, initiated at the beginning of the 1930s, was the transformation (and resulting near destruction) of the agricultural sector
- His first initiative was the liquidation of a large class of peasants known as "kulaks"

- All of the peasants who had prospered before the revolution or during NEP, or who objected to Soviet nationalization of agriculture, were arrested and executed on the pretext that they were hoarders
- The second initiative was the collectivization of agriculture, whereby privately held farms and land farmed communally in small villages were taken over by the state and consolidated into huge collective farms.
- This process essentially ended agricultural production throughout Ukraine and southern Russia -- the two regions that supplied the Soviet Union with most of its food
- The result was a more severe famine than in 1920-1922
- In Ukraine it is called the "holodomor" and considered an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people

The Purges (1930s)

- Early in his rule, Stalin initiated the arrest, usually on charges of espionage or some other anti-Soviet activity, of real and perceived political enemies and enemies of the state
- A series of public trials, often referred to as "show trials," with pre-ordained convictions, were held, and all these enemies, including most of Lenin's supporters from the revolution and civil war, were convicted and executed.
- Millions of other Soviet citizens were arrested for alleged political crimes in what came to be known as "The Great Terror" or "The Great Purge"
- Among those arrested were artists and intellectuals, as well as army officers, members of ethnic minorities, and people with connections to émigrés or anti-Bolshevik fighters from the civil war.
- Many hundreds of Americans, who had gone to the USSR seeking work or because they believed the propaganda of the Soviet government (which portrayed the country as prosperous and immune to the world financial crisis), were arrested.
- The American government refused to intervene and only a handful survived. For an account of this episode, see Tim Tzouliadis, *The Forsaken* (2008).
- These prisoners were sent to labor camps that came to be known (as noted earlier) by the Russian acronym "GULag."

The First Five Year Plans (1930s)

- In the manufacturing sector, Stalin undertook the forced industrialization of the country, which, as in Germany during the Nazi period, succeeded to some extent, at an incalculable human cost
- Again, perceived enemies of the state, including farmers who had prospered before the revolution, were made to do forced labor on various projects including the Moscow subway and the White Sea canal, where more than two hundred thousand laborers perished on one project.

The "Great Patriotic War" (WWII) 1941-1945

- All of this was going on in the Soviet Union while the events were taking place elsewhere that would lead to what we call World War II
- In the Soviet Union, that portion of the war that took place on Soviet territory is referred to as the "Great Patriotic War" – an allusion to the first "Patriotic War" of 1812.
- Stalin in 1939 signed a non-aggression treaty with the Germans, dividing much of Eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence.
- It was in this period that the Soviets massacred more than 20,000 Polish officers in and near a place called the Katyn Forest.
- That number is in dispute, but no one disputes that several thousand were killed
- Hitler nonetheless was determined to conquer the Soviet Union, and on June 22, 1941, launched his invasion
- The Soviet Union was ill-prepared, in no small measure because Stalin had purged some three quarters of the officer corps of the armed forces
- In addition, troops were scattered throughout the Soviet Union despite the fact that an attack seemed imminent
- Also, Stalin himself seemed ill-prepared and surprised by the attack. He made no public appearances and took no major decisions for several days after the invasion
- As a result of initial inactivity and lack of preparedness, the Soviets suffered huge initial losses of life and territory as the Germans drove as far as the western suburbs of Moscow
- Much of this territory was the traditional homeland of many of the Jews in the Soviet Union, and some 1.5 of the 6 million Jews killed in the Holocaust were residents of the USSR

- Despite these initial losses, however, the Red Army, ultimately was able to stop the Germans, in part because of early and harsh winters in 1941 and 1942 (as there had been in 1812)
- The government was able to save industrial production for the war effort by moving whole factories and their workers to towns east of the Ural Mountains
- There is no doubt that the Soviet army fought bravely during the war against what at first were tremendous odds, defeating the Germans at Stalingrad and in many other battles
- Among the tactics that Stalin used to rally the people were the re-opening of the churches, and popular appeals to Russian, rather than Soviet, patriotism
- Soldiers were no doubt motivated, as they had been in 1812, by the fact that they were fighting on their own territory and in some cases in their home villages
- Stalin also released some of the most effective officers, and many common soldiers as well, from the camps
- The traditional estimate of Soviet loss of life in the "Great Patriotic War" was twenty million dead but a figure of 27 million now seems more accurate
- When the war ended, it became the central theme of official Soviet and popular culture
- It was held up as the one great achievement of, and justification for, Soviet power
- It was commemorated annually with parades and celebrations
- Veterans received special privileges, including the right to go to the head of any line (and there were long lines in the Soviet Union), and more substantive rights like special pensions and housing
- The war, well into the 1960s, was by far the most common topic of popular literature and film
- In recent years there has once again been a concerted effort to foreground the war in popular culture and even political discourse
- However, the popular Soviet view of the war is problematic on several counts because it leaves out the following information
- The Soviet Union blamed the United States and Britain for failing to open a second front until June, 1944, but in fact the USSR would not have survived the first months of the war without American aid.
- For example, the historian Max Hastings notes that the United States supplied the Soviet Union with "5 million tons of American meat that eventually reached Russia amounted to half a pound of rations a day for every Soviet soldier. Allied food shipments probably averted a starvation catastrophe in the winter of 1942-

43” (*Inferno* 315). Hastings also notes that by 1945 two thirds of the Soviet Union’s military vehicles, and half the Red Army’s boots, were American-made.

- Much of the loss of life of Soviet troops, especially early in the war, was due to such policies as shooting troops who retreated, use of troops as human decoys or to clear minefields, massive suicide attacks, and a scorched-earth policy during the German advance that included executing Soviet troops in military hospitals rather than take them along
- Catherine Merridale relates in *Night of Stone* the discovery in the 1970s of a Soviet military hospital in which all the remains were wounded Soviet troops who had been executed with Soviet-made bullets
- It also has come to light that there were widespread atrocities, and in particular rape, committed by Soviet troops in Germany, where they eventually advanced as far as Berlin
- It is also now widely known that Stalin settled scores against certain national minorities, such as the Crimean Tatars and the Chechens, who had resisted Soviet power, by forcing whole populations to re-locate to other parts of the Soviet Union. We will speak more about this later in the course
- German soldiers of the Wehrmacht (German army) were viewed by millions of Soviet citizens as liberators, especially in Ukraine and western Russia where the suffering under the Bolsheviks had been greatest
- It was only after the SS took over, and treated the civilian population even more brutally than the Soviets, that many Soviet citizens turned against Germany
- If Hitler had not been determined to subjugate the USSR he likely could have defeated it by employing the millions of Russians, Ukrainians, Caucasians and others who despised the Bolsheviks
- Although it is not commonly known, as many as a million Soviet citizens defected to Germany during the war
- The Soviet general Andrei Vlasov, who led the defense of Moscow during the early days of the war and was the first Soviet general to defeat the Germans in battle, eventually attempted to form a Russian liberation army, armed by but independent from the Germans, to fight against the Soviets
- The majority of Russians who attempted to fight the Soviets during the war, as well as those Soviet citizens who were captured by the Germans and worked as slave laborers, were eventually repatriated to the USSR, where they were imprisoned and in many cases executed, as a result of an agreement between Churchill Roosevelt and Stalin.
- All in all there is now a more realistic view of the war: it represented a tremendous effort on the part of the Soviet people and the soldiers and officers of the Red Army, but the human cost was great, many of the losses could have been

avoided, the Soviet troops did not always behave in a heroic manner, and millions of Russians believed there was not much to choose between Hitler and Stalin

The Post-war period (1940s-50s)

- After the war, returning troops and all Soviet citizens hoped for and expected a return to something of a normal life
- Instead, Stalin initiated another purge against so-called enemies of the state
- In one phase of this purge Jews were singled out, and we will discuss it in greater detail later during our discussion of the Jews of Russia
- Also singled out were Soviet prisoners of war, returning troops who had been in Western Europe, and civilians who had lived in territory occupied by the Germans (many of whom were forcibly repatriated by the allies). Members of all these groups were sent to the GULag.
- In the years 1946-1947 there occurred the last of the Soviet famines
- It was not on the scale of the previous famines, but is thought to have resulted in tens of thousands of deaths – a small number only in the Soviet context
- Some demographers now believe the number of victims is closer to one million
- The writer Valentin Rasputin mentions this famine frequently in his early stories – a bold move at the time he was writing them

The Death of Stalin (1953)

- Stalin died on March 5, 1953 – a date that occasioned much discussion several years ago on the fiftieth anniversary of his death.
- According to legend, he was murdered because he was contemplating an even greater purge, or at the very least, nothing was done to help him after he suffered a stroke
- He probably died a day or two earlier than the fifth, but the news was kept from the Soviet people until the leadership decided what to do.
- We now know from recently released documents that the process of "destalinization" began immediately after his death.

The "Thaw" (1953-1963)

- After Stalin's death there was no pre-arranged procedure for succession, and there occurred a struggle for power
- The most likely successor, the head of the secret police under Stalin, was a fellow-Georgian named Lavrentii Beria
- The other contenders, including several members of Stalin's inner circle, were able to unite long enough to agree that they did not want Beria, whom they had arrested and executed.
- Ultimately, one person emerged as leader of the party and therefore of the Soviet Union: Nikita Khrushchev (note proper Russian pronunciation: khrū-shchóv)
- Khrushchev had been a party leader in Ukraine prior to the second world war, where he had helped to carry out mass arrests and enforce the collectivization of agriculture
- After the war he played a similar role on a national level as one of Stalin's associates in Moscow during the purges of the late 1940s
- After Stalin's death, he suppressed these facts, and presented himself to the world as a benign and jovial reformer whose chief goal was to dismantle Stalin-era institutions of repression and compensate the victims of that repression.
- He was even viewed as something of a buffoon, as when he visited a corn farm in the United States, returned to Russia and immediately undertook an ill-fated large-scale corn-farming venture, or when he took off his shoe and banged it on the podium to emphasize a point at the United Nations.
- In reality, we now know from recently released documents that he was in fact complicit in many of Stalin's policies prior to 1953, and his reforms in the period 1953-1963 were very problematic
- There did nonetheless occur under Khrushchev, and indeed even during the succession struggle from 1953-1956, a period of "destalinization" or, as it was generally termed in the Soviet Union, exposure of the "Cult of Personality"
- As these terms show, there was no real attempt to criticize the Communist Party or the system itself
- Rather, the objective was to blame Stalin alone as much as possible and to claim that his divergence from Leninist policies led to all that had happened
- Destalinization included the official "rehabilitation" of many who had been condemned and for the most part executed, and the release of survivors who were still in prison
- There were a number of circumstances that weakened the destalinization campaign:

- While some prisoners were released, many others continued to be arrested
- Among the first prisoners to be released during the various amnesties of the period were usually criminal, and not political prisoners
- The released prisoners were supposed to receive compensation, including housing (which was always hard to find in the Soviet Union) and a job in their chosen profession, but often they did not receive these things because local officials were slow to implement, or refused to obey, orders from above
- There was no attempt to help the released prisoners recover psychologically or physically from their ordeal
- The process nonetheless was accelerated with a speech that Khrushchev gave in 1956 at the 20th congress of the Communist Party, and continued through the early 1960s
- Among its most notable features was a reduction in censorship of the arts, which resulted in the landmark literary event of the decade: the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, after Khrushchev gave another speech, this time to the 22nd Party Congress in 1961, suggesting that the camps might no longer be taboo as a topic for literature
- *Novyi Mir* [New World], the journal in which the novel was published, received thousands of letters thanking the editors for at last telling the story of the victims of the camps
- The reaction to this novel was so great that Solzhenitsyn was never allowed to publish again in the USSR
- The reaction was so great, in fact, that it frightened the hierarchy of the Communist Party, who were also displeased with Khrushchev's attempts to transfer some power from the ministries in Moscow to local authorities
- All of this led to Khrushchev's removal in a bloodless coup in 1964.

The "Period of Stagnation" (1964-1985)

- After a struggle for power among top leaders, Leonid Brezhnev emerged as leader of the country
- The period of Brezhnev's leadership is now known by a term popularized in the Soviet Union itself during the Gorbachev era: "Period of Stagnation" (1963-1985)
- This was a period of continued censorship in the arts, suppression of dissidents, slow economic growth resulting in a poor standard of living, and therefore, increasing dissatisfaction among average Soviet citizens.
- Destalinization came to a halt

- The Soviet Union entered the final phase of its existence
- There were a number of reasons why the Soviet Union finally reached the point of collapse at the end of the 1980s
- The economy had failed. The economist Anders Åslund, in his book *Building Capitalism: The Transformation of the Former Soviet Bloc*, describes how the Soviet government nationalized all industry and instituted central control of the economy in the form of Moscow ministries that made all decisions for economic enterprises throughout the country
- The economist John Kay, in *Culture and Prosperity*, summarizes the problems of Soviet central planning

No society in history offered such a wide range of rewards and punishments as the Soviet Union, from the economic and political privileges of the *nomenklatura* to the slave camps of the Gulag. The Soviet economic problem was not an absence of incentives: incentives to conform to the dictates of the center were strong. The Soviet economic problem was that the planners did not have good information on which to base their directions to production units. Above all, the Soviet economy foundered on these problems of information and incentives. And the information problem is the more fundamental. If a powerful state could accurately calibrate both abilities and needs, it could enforce production according to abilities and assignment according to needs. This is what the Soviet Union sought, and failed, to do (97-8).

- Kay uses an example from everyday contemporary life to illustrate a preferable alternative to central planning:

Khrushchev did not have to worry about which queue to join at the supermarket checkout, but you do. You can look at the characteristics of the queues: how many people, how full are their carts? Will those ahead unload their baskets quickly? Or engage in extended discussion with the cashier?

Or you can simply join the nearest queue. So long as some people – it need not be very many – are scanning the store to find the shortest queue, you can expect that the time you spend in each queue will be roughly the same. If any queue looks short, these activists will join it. The activists probably wait slightly less time than you, but not much – enough, however, to give them some return on their socially beneficial activity.

This is a simple and banal example of a system of spontaneous order. It is organized, and in some respects efficient, but it is not directed. It is probably more effective at keeping down waiting times than directions by

a bossy store manager. The manager would not be able to keep pace sufficiently well with the constantly changing progress at the checkouts, nor would he always find people ready to follow his instructions – the twin problems of information and incentives that confront planners everywhere (128-9).

- The Soviet economy exemplified these problems: There were no markets, there was no competition, prices were regulated, make-work jobs were created to keep unemployment at zero, there was little participation in the global economy, and resources were concentrated on the development of heavy industry such as steel production, which Marx had said was the precondition for socialism, and the defense industry to keep up with the United States.
- The supposed chief benefit of these economic policies was a spate of subsidized social services, including free universal medical care -- which people frequently cite to this day as a good point of the Soviet Union
- In fact, medical care and other social services were of poor quality, not always accessible to everyone, and free only to the end-user, which meant that the USSR (after it had squandered the pre-1917 wealth of the country) had to borrow heavily from foreign lenders. The Russian Federation, to its credit, has now largely paid back those loans with revenue from oil and gas.
- The result of these policies was weak economic growth, a lack of consumer goods, and a decrease in the standard of living
- Soviet foreign policy in Eastern Europe failed. After the second world war, a number of countries fell entirely under Soviet domination, including Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, and East Germany. At different times in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia there were attempts by native politicians to reject Soviet domination, and the Soviets responded each time by sending troops to restore the pro-Soviet government. By the 1980s this had become difficult to do and the costs far outweighed the benefits
- The United States continued to press for freedom for the countries of Eastern Europe. President Reagan called the Soviet Union the “evil empire,” condemned in 1983 the shooting down by the Soviets of a Korean Airlines airliner, and on June 12, 1987 visited West Berlin where he called on the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this wall," meaning the literally the wall that separated East and West Berlin but figuratively the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe.
- The Soviets in 1979 became involved in a war in Afghanistan, ostensibly at the request of the socialist government there. In Feb. 2009 Russian veterans of this war commemorated the 20th anniversary of the final Soviet withdrawal from the country.
- The war was unpopular, it produced massive casualties, and it led to a boycott by many countries, including the United States, of the 1980 Summer Olympics.

- The Republics were restless. The Soviet Union consisted of fifteen constituent Republics. Russia was the largest and most influential. Others included Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltics, the Southern Republics, and the Central Asian Republics. Increasingly these Republics, which were quite different from one another and varied in their allegiance to the Soviet Union, began to demand autonomy.
- Under the Soviet constitution, in fact, they had the right to secede, but until the end of the '80s this right was fictional. At that time, various Republics, and in particular the Baltics, began to express the desire actually to secede.
- Within the Russian Republic, other regions and ethnic minorities, such as the Chechens, also began to press for independence
- The Soviet Union had refused to face its past. There were through the late Soviet period millions of former prisoners and their families who still could not even talk openly about their experiences in the camps, much less receive compensation
- Finally, and perhaps most important, there were still many restrictions on personal freedoms, there was no representative government, and little incentive for personal achievement.
- When Leonid Brezhnev died, the old guard of the Party attempted to retain control by appointing two of its members, Yuri Andropov (1982-4) and Konstantin Chernenko (1984-5), as heads of state.
- When Chernenko died in 1985, he was replaced by a career Communist Party functionary from the provinces named Mikhail Gorbachev

Glasnost and Perestroika

- Gorbachev (b. 1931) was the first Soviet ruler to experience the Stalin period as a child and the first to come of age politically after the Great Patriotic War
- As General Secretary of the Communist Party and leader of the USSR, he was the first to realize the need for substantive reform in order to preserve the system.
- His reforms are referred to as "Glasnost," or openness, and "Perestroika," or reconstruction of the economy.
- It must be noted that Gorbachev was, in fact, a proponent not of radical change, much less the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but rather of limited reform to preserve the system
- As to other policies, he continued the internment of dissidents and the funding of covert anti-government operations in various countries, including the U. S.
- His greatest reform, which he was not able to carry out fully, was his plan to grant more autonomy to the constituent republics of the Soviet Union and to curtail Russian domination of the Eastern European countries.

- He also encouraged the growth of a cooperative movement in the USSR and made some concessions to private enterprise
- He also did allow at least the beginnings of a re-examination of the Soviet past
- Ultimately, his reforms failed to satisfy not only liberals, who felt he had not gone far enough, but also conservatives, known as "hardliners," who felt he had gone too far
- The liberals included Boris Yeltsin, who had been elected President of the Russian Republic in the first free elections ever held in Russia
- Yeltsin's intention was to take Russia out of the Soviet Union and form an independent Russian Federation
- In August of 1991, a group of Hardliners, including high-ranking officials of the KGB, the armed forces and the Ministry of Defense, decided that Gorbachev was not doing enough to stop the breakup of the Soviet Union
- They demanded that he declare a state of emergency or resign
- He refused, and the Hardliners responded by staging a coup. They prevented Gorbachev from returning to Moscow from his vacation home in the Crimea, and they dispatched tanks and armored personnel carriers to downtown Moscow
- They were opposed by Yeltsin and the parliament of the Russian Republic as well as huge crowds that gathered in Moscow
- The parliament refused to leave its headquarters, known as the "White House," and the crowd formed a defense around the building
- At one point Yeltsin, with the crowd in support, barred the path of the tanks and defied them to take over the parliament. The soldiers refused to attack and ultimately the coup was foiled
- Gorbachev returned from the Crimea, but Yeltsin now held all political power
- Gorbachev resigned as leader of the Soviet Union, which was officially dissolved in December, 1991, and all of the constituent Republics became independent countries.