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Why did the Soviet Union collapse?

The Soviet Union also known as Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), an empire located in eastern Europe and northern Asia, formed on 30 December 1922, and officially collapsed on 26 December 1991. A state that was ruled under one party (communism) and one capital (Moscow) called the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Russian SFSR) largest among the communist republics. The emergence of the Soviet Union after a great war eventually evolved into a great military superpower and the idea of communism was demonstrated as a secure and stable society for the whole Soviet ruled Republics. However, the Union couldn't last for long and soon disintegrated by three major factors, that include western strive for democratization across the world, extreme corruption and deep-rooted economic crisis within the communist system and the movement of Soviet republics from communism to western democracies. In particular, "the intrinsic contradictions of the Soviet planned economy" played out a fundamental role the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Moreover, "systematic corruption, the growing stratification of society, the open intra-elite conflicts, and access to the outside world" made it's demolition inevitable (Petrasova, 2003). Of equal importance, Ronald Reagan's policy towards the implosion of the communists is also worth noting. His "moral clarity" and "massive defense spending" resulted in the bankruptcy of entire Eurasia both economically and ideologically (Petrasova, 2003). In other words, an arms race with the westerners that opened up huge wounds in the Soviet economy and were impossible to be repaired. This piece of writing sheds light on both long-term controversies within the USSR, and its struggle with the outside world that resulted in the collapsed of the Soviet bloc.

When we talk about the crisis and corruption in the Soviet Union, Brezhnev's era was considered to be on its peak. Most of the population was falsely believed by lies and the most corrupted government at that time. Regarding the dishonesties "cynicism and scepticism towards the professed ascetic moral values of the Communists among the public" (Petrasova, 2003). As a result, these kinds of practices led many to the rejection of the communist-based system. Under such circumstances, the Soviet "intelligentsia" had to move and integrate with the west, national or religious traditions due to the wicked and falsely beliefs of the Soviet government. Apart from the Yuri Andropov's (fourth General Secretary of the Communist Party) minor contribution to

the weak condition of the party, Konstantin Chernenko (fifth General Secretary of the communist party of the Soviet Union) made its position worsen rather than uplifting the already impoverished economy of the state. He created a government that solely depend on “physical and ideological coercion”. As the T.H. Rigby stated that, “people gradually found they could get away with a great deal in the way of unorthodox opinions and behaviour in private.” (Petrasova, 2003).

Another most important point to be focussed is the two different vision of Soviet masses and elite ruling the communist system. In the era of post-Stalinist, both economies of union and living standards across the region were considerably boosted that had stabilized the system for a couple of decades. However, on the other hand, due to the industrialization middle class of that epoch become well-educated, and conscious about the absurdity of the government and was radically criticized by the educated. According to the statistics “The number of specialists – the so-called intelligentsia – grew from some 2 million before World War II to over 30 million in the 1980s” (Petrasova, 2003). The emergence of such a well-educated middle-class power across the region liberalized the “Soviet polity” ideologically. Moreover, the “civil society” has achieved its autonomy from elite ruling the party. Under such circumstances, it is believed that “industrialization, urbanization and growing specialization of the economy had profound influences on the values and attitudes of large segments of the population” (Petrasova, 2003). With the aspect of all these changes across the entire state, it is obvious that the peasant class played a fundamental role in the disintegration of “Soviet polity” by opposing the party’s demands and criteria.

During the sixties and seventies, the Soviet planned economy underwent through severe hurdles and inevitable crisis. For instance, the strive for more “intensive, specialized and hi-tech methods” of post-industrial economy located in Silicon Valley failed. Its success could have brought considerable changes to the state. Similarly, Reagan’s advancement in arms at the beginning of the eighties and the technological gap of the soviet union was universally proportional to the west. During those years west saw tremendous evolution in the technology, such progress has greatly pressurized the communist rulers. As Martin Malia argued that the difference between west and communists “precluded any kind of economic revival” in the Union

(Petrasova, 2003). Moreover, “the Star Wars program was militarily unfeasible, SDI posed a technological and economic challenge the Soviets could neither ignore nor match’ and this was the crucial catalyst for the Andropovite-Gorbachevian economic restructuring agenda” (Petrasova, 2003). Under such pressures, one of the main organs of Soviet Union “military-industrial complex” has realized the need for a strong economic reform and utilized its extensive power against the capitalist world in order to sustain the system. Subsequently, the international rivalries brought by military-based operations of Soviet union severely undermined its potential to struggle with the already frail economy of the empire (Petrasova, 2003).

The Soviet communist system has been completely totalitarian since its formation. It had no ties with the outside world. A system that had encapsulated each and every aspect of Soviet society. However, despite being immensely monolithic based administration, the so-called intelligentsia brought upon considerable changes by co-operating with the west and welcoming certain elements of the rest of the world under “détente” policies. Such a move towards the democracy was highly debated among the Soviet rulers and considering it as an act of demolishing the Union. As Alexander Dullin argued that “the increasing acquaintance and fascination with foreign norms, styles and practices – and goods – would in their own way, further contributed to the erosion of commitments to official Soviet Orthodoxy” (Petrasova, 2003). Mikhail Gorbachev (the last leader of Soviet Union) who introduced the idea of “glasnost” which means “openness and transparency”. The term was peculiarly associated with economic reform and judicial system in the mid-eighties. Eventually, “glasnost” was demonstrated as a political slogan for increasing the system transparency in the Soviet empire. However, the transparency level was kept limited in the attempt to sustain relationships with the Stalinist era, and the fear of publicizing the long-term corruption and oppression within the Stalin system that could have led to the demolition of the entire Empire. As Malia argues that the “loss of legitimacy would prove fatal to the system; for its surreal structures were such that they could not survive exposure to the truth” (Petrasova, 2003).

Despite the longstanding and deep-rooted crisis of Soviet empire for decades, there are several other short-lived events which escalated in the dissolution of the Union. Among the major incidents’ was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The Soviet thought of Afghanistan invasion as a piece of cake to be invaded without considering USA’s power against

the communism. On the contrary, the Red Army disdained the capitalist tactics i.e. supporting Mujahidin (Afghan freedom fighters) against the Soviet occupation. These fighters were “well armed with US-supplied surface-to-air missiles, rockets, mortars, and communication equipment, [and] won many confrontations with the Soviet army” (REUVENY and PRAKASH, 1999). The small-scale intervention of Soviet forces took almost a decade of ongoing war in Afghanistan. Nearly one million Soviet soldiers were involved in the invasion, in which tens of thousands were killed. Moreover, the army’s poor performance and unethical behaviours had also a huge impact on the Soviet occupation. The moral legitimacy of the army was demolished by immoral acts such as corruption, looting, and plundering. Interestingly, “the ethnic split in the army was accentuated when non-Russian soldiers, particularly those from Asian regions, displayed [an] ambivalence toward fighting Afghans, deserted, and even revolted” (REUVENY and PRAKASH, 1999). By late 1986, Soviet’s war against Afghan freedom fighters was not the only hurdle to be dealt but also the sanctions imposed by USA and UN accusation of Soviet military’s mass killing in the region had led to the turning point of their occupation. With the aspect of all these problems forced Mikhail Gorbachev to withdraw its forces from the region by 1989. A peace treaty was signed in 1988 before the full disengagement of the Soviet army from the Afghan territory (REUVENY and PRAKASH, 1999).

The invasion not only resulted in the decline of Soviet Union but also left a huge gap in Afghanistan which was later filled with brutality, kidnapping, abusing children and women, hunger, persecution, and raping at its peak. No human could bare the tyranny exercised by the unknown by factional groups in the post-soviet invasion. Numerous innocent civilians were killed and displaced from their homes. A research conducted by World Peace Foundation shows that only during the Soviet invasion (1979 -1998) nearly “800,000 – 1.5 million Afghans died. It is estimated that at least 5,000 civilians were killed annually until the Taliban regime took control over most the region by 1998”. (World Peace Foundation. 2018). During the Soviet occupation and till their withdrawal, fatal violence was at their peak in the years 1983 and 1986. In order to drive the Mujahideen out of the country, Soviet instead forced and killed thousands of civilians out of their properties and planted landmines throughout the region. Until the present day, several NGOs are working tirelessly in diffusing the landmines that were deployed by Soviet. The activities increased by Mujahideen were directly proportional to violence escalated by Russian forces. It is said that “The massive infusion of military aid to multiple sides of the

Afghan conflict, the power vacuum left behind from the Soviet withdrawal, and persistent ethnic divisions set the stage for continued fighting.” (World Peace Foundation. 2018). Several regional power brokers including “Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan, played their crucial role in deepening the tensions across the region”. (World Peace Foundation. 2018) As an outcome, the standard of living fell dramatically, with no supply of food, water, and electricity. Civilians started to flee the country approximately 2-3 million immigrated towards Pakistan and around 1.5 million resided in Iran. (A Ruiz, 2018). The consequences of all these brutal incidents led UN to stop the Red army as soon as possible.

The role of Solidarity in Poland led by working class has led to the failure of communism in the region. In 1956, workers stood up for political and economic changes across the country. As a result, nearly hundred protesters were killed and rest were brutally oppressed by the Soviet authorities. Such attempts of protesters particularly by workers and students were repeated several times from 1956 to 1989. Unfortunately, the so-called Polish intelligentsia was disappeared from landscape during all struggles against the communist .The suppression of Soviet authorities over the aggrieved was at its peak e.g. “Workers were brought in to stage demonstrations against student “hooligans” and “troublemakers” and the communist rulers crushed the students and intellectuals with ease” (The Solidarity, 2018). In 1976, the number of the freedom strugglers had increased over time, many other minorities joined the strikes including the intellectuals. In 1980, solidarity was achieved at the Lenin Shipyards. With the ongoing struggles, the first president (Lech Walesa) of the national congress was elected under the slogan of “The Self-Governing Republic” (The Solidarity, 2018). This progression made by the anti-communists made the government worried about the decline of communism across the country. In order to shutter the union, the authorities attempted to imposed martial law in 1981 and similar attacks continued for several years. The already strained fiscal condition of USSR and pressures from USA and UN compelled communists to negotiate with the Polish Solidarity. It is said that “The changes that ensued promised the downfall of socialism in Poland”. Eventually, the government was knocked down to roundtable for talks which in result lead to the Polish first free election in 1989. The downfall of communism in Poland was the actually the beginning of disintegration of the whole Soviet Bloc (The Solidarity, 2018).

At the time of the revolution of eastern Europe so many other countries that were previously under the soviet yoke had also overthrown the communist regimes. After the Polish Solidarity, the idea of revolution soon spread to Czechoslovakia, Czech Republic by 1993, followed by Hungary, Romania and other parts of former Soviet bloc began to break through the straitjacket of soviet totalitarianism. The wave of democratization in Eastern Europe claimed to join western institutions, union and western economies. All these countries that had joined the western bloc have seen a peaceful transition of power from former communism to the states becoming liberal democracies except Romania where violence is witnessed with the elimination of the Soviet regime. Europe at that time was too busy by the countries that were moving from communist based system to democracies. So many different dimensions of politics were beginning to co-exist in the tiny geographical space. Furthermore, the arrival of Gorbachev and Kremlin in 1980s with the notions of glasnost and perestroika had created a series of chain events which in the end resulted in the independence of former Soviet republics e.g. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) (Leffler, 2018). With the aspect of these changes, the United Nations open up membership to so many states newly created after the demise of the Soviet Empire.

To sum up everything, the dissolution of the Soviet empire is caused by several factors as explained above. The elements are categorized into three main aspects, firstly the western policies of democratization against the communism. This includes Ronald Reagan's strong economic policy towards the demolition of the communists, high prices in the oil, USA sponsorship of Afghan freedom fighters against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the technological gap between the west and Soviet empire putting USSR under pressure. Secondly, the extreme corruption and peculiarly the deep-rooted economic crisis within the Union such as the growth of "cynicism and scepticism towards the professed ascetic moral values of the Communists among the public", "the intrinsic contradictions of the Soviet planned economy", "military-industrial complex" in attaining the economic reform by utilizing its extensive power against the capitalist world, and Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika "openness and transparency" allowing western standards and freedom. Thirdly, the Soviet republics movement from communism to western democracies. The aspect of all these events make one understand of why did the soviet union collapse?

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