

End of Czarist Russia and Rise of the Bolsheviks

At the dawn of the 20th century, Russia was dominated by the czarist government system, which placed absolute political power under the Russian emperor by virtue of blood. Under the leadership of the last Russian czar, Czar Nicholas II, corruption, a horrible World War I campaign, and a declining economy had taken their toll on a wide array of Russian affairs. It was not until the October Revolution of 1917 when the Bolsheviks¹, a group of prominent Russian communist leaders, inspired by their Marxist ideals and the declining political situation, took advantage of the circumstances and led an armed revolt in St. Petersburg (then known as Petrograd). Led by Vladimir Lenin, the Bolshevik party overthrew the current Provisional Government of Russia and established its own government. Members of the Bolshevik Party declared themselves the rightful rulers of Russian government ministries and assumed control from the bustling cities to the outer Russian countryside. In order to counter any threat of opposition to the momentum of the Bolshevik takeover, Vladimir Lenin specifically ordered the creation of the Cheka², a military police force that investigated any counterrevolutionary manifestations and quickly (and violently) mobilized to quash them.

In the midst of this insurrection, various groups of workers and industrial laborers began organizing themselves into councils, known as Soviets. Seeing a conjunction between their ideals and political ambitions, the Soviets increasingly began supporting the Bolsheviks and electing them into key positions once the nascent government was created and baptized as the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic on November 9th, 1917, with the adoption of its constitution in 1918. This was the first time the world had ever witnessed the self-declaration of a socialist state, along with the debut of the iconic sickle and hoe flag within a red background. The new Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic aimed for “*the abolition of the exploitation of men by men, the entire*

¹ Bolshevik literally means “one of the majority”.

² Cheka translates as emergency commission.

abolition of the division of the people into classes, the suppression of exploiters and the establishment of a socialist society.”

First Years of the SFSR and the Inception of the USSR

The first few years of the Russian Socialist Federative Republic were turbulent as many internal and external forces challenged the new government's power. Towards the end of World War I civil war broke out in Russia. Although there were external actors involved, notably Germany and other Western powers, conflict was centered between the Bolshevik “Red” Army and the loosely united anti-Bolshevik “White” Army. The Red Army was ultimately victorious and maintained political domination of the majority of Russian territory.

However, the Russian Socialist Federative Republic had changed. Peripheral territories under Russian dominion were lost as Estonia, Poland, Lithuania, Finland, and Latvia, areas originally under part of the Russian Empire, became sovereign states. Germany also acquired a sizable amount of territory under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. In addition, the Russian Socialist Federative Republic became a new entity known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), with the Treaty of the Creation of the USSR, officially signed on December 30th, 1922. This new power united the Russian, Byelorussian, Ukrainian, and Transcaucasian republics into one socialist, federally organized behemoth.

Stalin and Industrialization

A close follower of Lenin, Joseph Stalin was the USSR's next leader. Under his rule, the USSR underwent a rapid period of industrialization and of copious government nationalization. The Planned economy was implemented as a means of maximizing certain government resources and products. Stalin's first notorious Five-Year Plan was implemented in 1928 and collectivized agriculture in an attempt to increase crop yields and maximize the supply of industrial workers for growing factories. This plan, however, destroyed the productivity of the traditional farmers known as kulaks, leading to large-scale famines in which millions died of starvation (especially in the Ukraine).

Opponents of Stalin's policies were often arrested by the successor to the Cheka, known as the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs or NKVD, and were sent to intensive labor camps known as gulags³ or simply shot. From 1937 to 1938, a period known as the "Great Purge", the NKVD executed millions of people and sent tens of millions more to gulags.

Road to WWII

Towards the onset of World War II, the USSR expanded upon a variety of foreign affairs platforms. In 1933, the United States of America, an expanding world power, officially recognized the Soviet Union. Ironically, the USSR moved on to do something the United States had failed to do and join the League of Nations, a precursor to the United Nations spearheaded by United States President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Towards the late 1930s, the USSR saw increased negotiation with Nazi Germany, culminating in the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact which divided Eastern Europe between the two nations. Another neutrality act with the Japanese Empire further expanded the USSR's external reach. During Adolf Hitler's surprise invasion, the Soviet Union suffered a tremendous loss of human life but ultimately greatly contributed to Germany's defeat. In 1950, the USSR and Maoist China signed a 30 year alliance treaty as countries with similar communist ideals, and in 1955 the Warsaw Pact was signed. Sparks of the Cold War began to fly between the US and USSR.

De-Stalinization

In 1953, Nikita Khrushchev succeeded Joseph Stalin as first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. He soon began an ambitious policy later known as De-Stalinization in which he condemned the crimes committed by the Stalinist government, eased repressive policies, and promised a return to Leninist principles. Such a course of action shocked communist followers worldwide who had been taught to admire Stalin and the Soviet Union's previous actions. Khrushchev even directly denounced Stalin in his so-called "Secret Speech" given at a closed session of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

³ GULAG is an acronym for Glavnoye upravleniye lagerey, or "Main Camp Administration".

Post-Stalin Thaw

During Khrushchev's tenure, the Soviet Union entered a period of relaxation or "thawing" of strict policies. Government censorship was decreased, hundreds thousands of political prisoners kept in the gulag were released, and economic policies were liberalized. Notably, living standards increased with economic growth. Nevertheless, Khrushchev's missteps during the Cuban Missile Crisis compounded his assaults upon Stalin to infuriate conservatives. In October 1964, KGB chairman Vladimir Semichastny and First Deputy Premier Alexander Shelepin cornered Khrushchev in Moscow when he returned from vacation and forced him to retire.

Leonid Brezhnev

Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev became the next General Secretary of the Communist Party. A traditionalist, he oversaw a reversal of Khrushchev's thaw and a return to Stalinist policies, which brought with them a general decline and decay. He also elaborated the "Brezhnev Doctrine", establishing the right of Communist countries to intervene into other Communist countries if they were in danger of turning to capitalism. At the same time, however, he eased of hostility towards the West through détente and the signing of antiballistic treaties such as SALT I and II. In 1982, Brezhnev was succeeded by KGB chief Yuri Andropov.

Mikhail Gorbachev

In March 1985, Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev was appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party. Throughout Gorbachev's entire career, Andropov had attempted to ensure his rise, but in 1984 when Andropov died Gorbachev was passed over by conservatives who feared he would drastically expand Andropov's program of reform. Instead, they chose Konstantin Chernenko, a traditionalist considered an "agreeable guy" who would be easy to control. But Chernenko, old and sickly, held power for barely a year, and when he died Gorbachev could no longer be ignored and was given power. Within a year came the moves conservatives feared: *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

Perestroika

Perestroika came first. The economy of the Soviet Union revolved around giant state-owned factories operated by giant state-owned companies which sold their goods in giant state-owned stores. With no real competition, there was little incentive for companies to grow: all that was necessary was to send glowing reports back to party headquarters boasting of phenomenal and wholly imaginary results. If companies did not have to actually perform well to survive, neither did their individual workers. And so they did not. By 1986, the shortcomings of the centrally-planned economy could no longer be ignored, even by the Party itself, and so Gorbachev introduced *perestroika*, or “restructuring”. Regulations were loosened, monopolies were broken, and private enterprise was encouraged. A few business men became very, very, rich by a combination of business acumen and less-than-legal tactics exploiting new markets for goods and services which suddenly appeared. And in fact Soviet GDP began rising dramatically. But most of the profits went into the pockets of those few men, and the rest of the population began to realize just how poor they really were. With careful propaganda and a crackdown on dissidents the poor might have been pacified. But quite the opposite happened.

Glasnost

With the exception of a brief interlude under Nikita Krushchev, culminating in his “Secret Speech”, the repressions of the Soviet Union had never been officially acknowledged – and even the Secret Speech was delivered only to a few members of the Party. Gorbachev set out to change this. In late 1987, during a speech in honor of the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution, he took the extraordinary step of admitting, in public on live television, that “thousands of the members of the Party and nonmembers were subjected to mass repressions.” He denounced “mass repressions and lawlessness”, and even referred to “the guilt of Stalin and those close to him.” This soon led to a more general policy of *glasnost*, or “openness”, in which censorship was slowly loosened. For the first time, the media could (gently) criticize Stalin, and people could learn the truth about the disappearances of family members during the purges. Even the poor state of affairs of the present could be discussed. With this came a

backlash by conservatives, and even some ordinary citizens felt Gorbachev was going too far in besmirching the past, and especially Stalin (read, for instance, Nina Andreyeva's unequivocal defense of Stalin in her essay "I Cannot Forsake My Principles"). But in general, the public began to speak more freely, and so did the dissidents.

The Return

Dissidents soon began eagerly testing the boundaries of *glasnost*. Andrei Sakharov, a nuclear scientist turned dissident and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, was allowed to return from exile in Gorky, and immediately began asking for more. In private, he asked Gorbachev to make clear his devotion to democracy, and in a speech to a party Congress he berated Gorbachev to end the Communist Party's "special role" in the government of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev, of course, was furious, and felt Sakharov was ungrateful and owed him his loyalty for ending his exile (Gorbachev eventually turned off Sakharov's microphone during the speech). Sakharov felt no such responsibility and continued to fight Gorbachev until the day he died in late 1989. But perhaps most important was Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn. The author of numerous historical novels illustrating the sins of the Soviet Union, his greatest work was *The Gulag Archipelago*, a towering and uncompromising three-volume indictment of the Soviet Union. He had become the first person forcibly exiled from the Soviet Union since Leon Trotsky. His writing used archaic Russian, was purposely difficult to understand, and demanded rather than asked for attention. But Solzhenitsyn's greatest sin in Gorbachev's eyes was his steadfast insistence that the Soviet Union's illegitimacy was rooted in Lenin, rather than accepting Gorbachev's thesis that Stalin had terribly corrupted his blameless policies. He further infuriated Gorbachev by demanding that *The Gulag Archipelago* be released immediately, rather than after his earlier, less strident works. When the literary magazine *Novy Mir* finally (after three tries) managed to begin publishing *The Gulag Archipelago* in July 1989, the public knew history had finally returned.

Eastern Europe

Meanwhile, of course, the Soviet Union's empire of Eastern European satellite nations began to crumble. Emboldened by the realization that they would not be crushed like the Hungarians in 1956 or the Czechoslovaks in 1968, the general population began pushing back against their Communist governments. In long-suffering Poland, Lech Wałęsa and Solidarity finally forced the communist government to agree to free elections in 1989 and 1990 (in which Solidarity gained power and he became President). In Czechoslovakia, the old Alexander Dubček returned to cheering crowds, some members of which still had memories of his Prague Spring. In Romania, the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and wife tried to flee the country with suitcases stuffed with cash, were caught, and were tried and executed on live television. Most spectacular was Germany. On November 9th a politician named Gunter Schabowski read from the wrong paper at a press conference, made it appear that border controls would be loosened, and within hours Berliners were dancing on top of the Wall (including a young woman named Angela Merkel). Eastern Europe was soon free, and by the end of 1989 citizens of member nations of the Soviet Union wondered why they, too, shouldn't rebel.

Gorbachev's Problems

Thus, by 1990, Gorbachev was in serious trouble. Conservatives, led by Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Anatoly Lukyanov, muttered that Gorbachev was forsaking his Communist heritage. They felt that *glasnost* and *perestroika* had served only to lay bare the failings of the Communist Party and expose its members to criticism, and that the way to prosperity lay in once again following Lenin. Moreover, Gorbachev had allowed the Soviet Union's buffer zone between itself and the West to disappear. The liberals, led by the confrontational and pugnacious Boris Yeltsin (now Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Republic), complained that Gorbachev was too beholden to the dinosaurs of the Party and was too timid to make necessary changes. Even one of Gorbachev's closest allies, Eduard Shevardnadze, resigned his position as Foreign Minister in protest of Gorbachev's refusal to stand up to conservatives. Dissidents were ever more brazen in their attacks on the regime. The general populace began realizing just how bad conditions really were, and the once unthinkable happened: workers began going on strike. A coal miners' strike during the winter was narrowly avoided. The

people were increasingly unwilling to swallow propaganda written by journalists increasingly unwilling to lie. The individual republics of the Soviet Union, encouraged by Yeltsin, began electing their own national governments. In January 1991, pro-democracy demonstrators at the Vilnius TV tower were massacred by Soviet tanks, and partially as a result, in February Lithuanian voters overwhelmingly approved a referendum on independence. This, of course, only enraged conservatives more, and simultaneously emboldened Yeltsin to grab more and more power for the Russian (as opposed to Soviet) government. It seemed everything Gorbachev did only made his position, awkwardly balanced between tensions on all sides, more precarious. The Soviet Union was coming apart at the seams, and everyone knew it.

A Decision

And thus, we now come to the present. On August 17th, 1991, Vladimir Kryuchkov, the head of the KGB, convened a meeting at a secret KGB compound with Defense Minister Dmitry Yazov, Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov, leader of the Communist Party Oleg Shenin, Deputy Chairman of the Defense Council Oleg Baklanov, and presidential Chief of Staff Valery Boldin. They agreed that something desperately needed to be done. Along with a few other powerful conservatives, they formed the State Committee on the State of Emergency (GKChP). Today, on the morning of August 18th, 1991, you and your comrades have gathered at the Kremlin to prepare to take power. Of critical importance will be to attempt to gain the support or at least tacit acceptance of Gorbachev, currently away on holiday in Foros. The rest is up to you.

Administrative Details

The actual GKChP formally consisted of Kryuchkov, Pavlov, Yazov, Baklanov, Vice President Gennady Yanayev, Interior Minister Boris Pugo, head of Union of Collective Farm Chairmen Vasily Starodubtsev, and president of Association of State Enterprises Aleksandr Tizyakov. For the purposes of MITMUNC, the GKChP will consist of all 24 delegates to the committee (all of whom, in real life, were involved to some degree in the August coup). Given the pace at which events moved, delegates should expect crises to occur in response to their actions, which they will have to deal with accordingly.

Although the committee will start running under the rules of full parliamentary procedure, it may at such times become expedient to suspend parliamentary procedure and rule by decree. If this is agreed to, the committee need simply write and pass directives by a simple majority. However, the chairs will not tolerate a suspension of parliamentary procedure for the entirety of the conference. Finally, delegates are reminded that they will have individual but limited portfolio powers in accordance with their personas' positions in the Soviet government. Delegates are allowed to make use of these by sending a note to the dais, but they will be limited to ensure that everyone in the committee has a reasonably equal chance to influence events (for instance, assassinations will not be allowed). We hope that you enjoy the committee. Good luck!

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