



# Nationalism and the Collapse of the Soviet Union

By: Angela Wandmacher Guerrero

# Table of contents

**Section 01:** SETTING THE STAGE

**Section 02:** GORBACHEV'S REFORMS

**Section 03:** THE NATIONALIST EXPLOSION

**Section 04:** THE COLLAPSE

**Section 05:** LEGACY & INTERPRETATION

# **01**

## **SETTING THE STAGE**



# What Was the USSR?

- Established in 1922 as a federation of fifteen union republics, each with nominal sovereignty
- Governed by a centralized single-party system under the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU)
- Comprised over 100 nationalities, encompassing diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities
- Officially promoted internationalism and proletarian unity, yet often prioritized Russification in practice



# Soviet Identity vs National Identity



- Early nationalities policy (*korenizatsiia*, 1920s) promoted local languages and cultures within a socialist framework
- Policy reversed by the mid-1930s in favor of Russification and increased centralization under Stalin
- Religious practices, local customs, and non-Russian languages were discouraged or repressed
- Historical education was revised to reflect party ideology and reinforce loyalty to the Soviet state
- Despite state pressure, national consciousness persisted through informal cultural, linguistic, and religious networks

# The 1980s Crisis Begins



- The Brezhnev Era (1964–1982) fostered political inertia and long-term economic stagnation
- The Soviet–Afghan War (1979–1989) cost over 15,000 Soviet lives and drained state resources
- Consumer goods shortages and rising black-market activity undermined economic credibility
- Economic failure and declining living standards fueled a growing crisis of legitimacy

# Why did the Soviet Union Fall?

- The fall of the USSR remains a subject of historical debate, with no single agreed-upon cause
- Gorbachev later cited the Chernobyl disaster (1986) as a pivotal moment in public disillusionment
- Reforms under perestroika and glasnost weakened central authority and exposed systemic failure
- Long-suppressed nationalist movements reemerged as political liberalization progressed
- Economic decline, ideological erosion, and the failure to contain ethnic and regional demands all contributed



02

# GORBACHEV'S REFORMS





# Gorbachev the Reformer

- Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party in March 1985 at age 54
- Sought to revitalize the Soviet Union through political and economic reform
- Introduced perestroika (economic restructuring) and glasnost (political openness)
- Advocated for “new thinking” in foreign policy, reducing Cold War tensions
- Aimed to preserve socialism through reform, not dismantle it

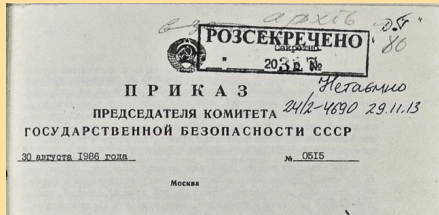


# Perestroika (Restructuring)

- Introduced in 1986 to address long-term economic stagnation and inefficiency
- Transferred authority from central ministries to state-owned enterprises under the Law on State Enterprises (1987)
- Legalized worker cooperatives and joint ventures with foreign firms (Law on Cooperatives, 1988)
- Introduced limited market pricing, weakening the central planning apparatus
- Aimed to improve productivity and accountability, but led to shortages, inflation, and a decline in output



# Glasnost (Openness)



- Introduced in 1986 to encourage transparency, truth-telling, and civic participation
- Lifted censorship on the press, literature, film, and historical research
- Enabled open discussion of Stalinist purges, the gulag system, and the Holodomor
- Public disclosure of the Chernobyl disaster (1986) intensified distrust in state institutions
- Passage of the Law on the Press (1990) formally ended state censorship
- Facilitated the emergence of independent publications, civil society groups, and nationalist organizations

# The Unintended Consequences

- Perestroika destabilized the planned economy, triggering shortages, inflation, and loss of public trust
- Glasnost exposed historical repression, government failures, and long-silenced national grievances
- Reduced fear of repression enabled the return of religious, linguistic, and ethnic identity
- Power shifted from the central government to local political movements and popular fronts
- Reforms meant to preserve socialism instead undermined the ideological legitimacy of the Soviet state



# **03**

## **THE NATIONALIST EXPLOSION**





# Where Nationalism Erupted



- Nationalist movements gained strength in the Baltic states, Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia
- In Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, independence was declared between 1990 and 1991 following mass mobilization
- In Ukraine, glasnost reignited memory of the Holodomor and fueled demands for cultural and political autonomy
- Armenia and Azerbaijan clashed over Nagorno-Karabakh, sparking ethnic violence in 1988
- In Georgia, nationalist parties gained power and pursued full secession by 1991
- Across the USSR, national language laws, flag restorations, and civic movements reasserted local identity

# The Baltic States Lead the Way

- Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were annexed by the USSR in 1940 under the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact
- National movements emerged in the late 1980s: Sąjūdis (Lithuania), Rahvarinne (Estonia), and the Latvian Popular Front
- On 23 August 1989, over 2 million people joined hands in the Baltic Way, spanning 675 km
- Lithuania declared independence on 11 March 1990; Latvia and Estonia followed in 1991
- January 1991: Soviet troops killed 14 civilians in Vilnius, but failed to stop the movement



# Ukraine Breaks Away



- Public discussion of the Holodomor (1932–1933) reemerged under *glasnost*, framing Soviet rule as colonial
- The People's Movement of Ukraine (Rukh) was founded in 1989 to promote cultural revival and political autonomy
- In 1989, Ukrainian was declared the official state language; churches and cultural institutions reopened
- On 21 January 1990, over 300,000 Ukrainians formed a 700 km human chain from Lviv to Kyiv
- On 1 December 1991, over 90% of voters supported independence in a national referendum



# Nationalism Turns Violent

- In 1988, Armenia demanded the transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnically Armenian enclave in Soviet Azerbaijan
- Clashes escalated into anti-Armenian pogroms in Sumgait and Baku, followed by retaliatory violence
- Over 300,000 Armenians fled Azerbaijan between 1988 and 1991; tens of thousands of Azerbaijanis were displaced from Armenia
- In Georgia, nationalist movements declared sovereignty in 1990, provoking conflict with South Ossetia and Abkhazia
- The Soviet state failed to contain rising interethnic violence, weakening central legitimacy further



# Georgia's From Moscow

- In 1990, Georgia declared sovereignty and rejected the legitimacy of Soviet central laws
- The Round Table-Free Georgia coalition, led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, won parliamentary elections
- On 9 April 1991, Georgia declared full independence — marking the first Caucasus republic to do so
- Internal unrest followed: South Ossetia and Abkhazia sought autonomy, backed by ethnic Russian support
- Moscow's limited intervention revealed the fading power of the central state



# Central Asia – Identity Reawakens



- Central Asian republics: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, were slower to embrace nationalism
- Strong ties to Moscow's political patronage and limited political pluralism delayed organized opposition
- Cultural revival focused on language, Islamic heritage, and post-colonial identity
- December 1986: Anti-Russian protests in Almaty (Kazakhstan) after Moscow appointed an ethnic Russian to lead the republic
- By 1991, all five republics declared independence, but elites often remained in power under new titles

# **04**

## **THE COLLAPSE**



# Economic Breakdown Deepens Divides

- By 1990, the economy had entered a severe crisis: National output declined sharply and inflation surged
- Shortages of food, fuel, and basic goods led to rationing and growing public unrest
- Republics began asserting economic sovereignty, withholding resources and revenues from the center
- Black markets and informal economies replaced state distribution systems
- The economic collapse deepened distrust in Moscow and strengthened calls for independence





# The August Coup & Yeltsin's Rise

- On 19 August 1991, Communist hardliners attempted a coup to halt reforms and preserve the USSR
- Coup leaders, State Committee on the State of Emergency or the GKChP, placed Gorbachev under house arrest and declared a state of emergency
- Boris Yeltsin, president of the Russian republic, led public resistance from the Russian White House
- Yeltsin's defiance, televised speeches, and mass protests caused the coup to collapse after three days
- The failed coup discredited the Communist Party and accelerated the dissolution of the union



# December 1991- The USSR Dissolves

- On 8 December 1991, leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus signed the Belavezha Accords, declaring the USSR dissolved
- The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was formed in its place
- On 25 December 1991, Gorbachev resigned as president and the Soviet flag was lowered over the Kremlin
- By 31 December, the USSR legally ceased to exist after 69 years
- The collapse marked the end of the Cold War and the emergence of 15 independent republics



**Final Takeway: Identity > Ideology**

# 05 LEGACY & INTERPRETATION





# Was Collapse Inevitable? USSR vs China

- Could the USSR have survived without *glasnost*?
- Did openness accelerate collapse or simply expose what was already broken?
- Was Gorbachev too idealistic for a system built on repression?



# Nationalism's Legacy Today?

- The war in Ukraine reflects the return of imperial thinking and unresolved national borders
- Frozen conflicts in Georgia (Abkhazia, South Ossetia) and Moldova (Transnistria) stem from Soviet-era divisions
- Putin's nationalism frames Russia as the heir to Soviet greatness, resisting Western influence
- Nationalism remains the most powerful force shaping post-Soviet identity and conflict



## **Discussion Prompt:**

**In today's political context, what matters more to people, freedom of speech, or the freedom to belong?**