Russia & The Soviet Union IV of IV Dr. Lawrence Davis

Post-1917 12 May 2025

ликвидация: одна сверхдержава, требуется некоторая сборка

The devolution was televised. From the choreographed declarations of the Party Congress to the protests in the streets of fracturing republics, the Soviet Union's final chapter unfolded on the screens of the world. When Mikhail Gorbachev took power in 1985, the Cold War was already simmering to an unsatisfying and undefined conclusion, but the Soviet Union itself had long since succumbed to systemic rot. His three reforms—glasnost (openness), perestroika (restructuring), and demokratizatsiya (democratization)—borrowed the language of Leninist revival, invoking the spirit of socialist reform without its revolutionary foundation. Framed as renewal, they instead dismantled the very forces still holding together the rotted corpse. Free speech revealed buried atrocities and long-suppressed resentments; democratization undermined the foundations of centralized control; and economic restructuring deepened crises that were already entrenched. The Soviet Union did not collapse because of Gorbachev's reforms—his reforms merely untied the final knots keeping the system of institutional stagnation from unraveling entirely.

This tension between transformation and cohesion defined the Gorbachev era. His core dilemma was never resolved: how to reshape a tightly controlled state without shattering the union it governed. That dilemma became violently visible in January 1991, when Soviet troops opened fire on Lithuanian protesters in Vilnius, killing fourteen people in an assault on the city's main television tower. As Thompson writes, "many observers concluded that the bloody January night in Vilnius symbolized the basic dilemma of the Gorbachev era: how to transform Soviet

socialism without breaking up the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) or precipitating civil conflict between reformers and conservatives" (Thompson 293–294). The reforms had unleashed forces—nationalist, democratic, and moral—that no longer answered to the Party center.

Nowhere was this paradox clearer than in glasnost. The path toward collapse began not with tanks, but with typewriters. Of Gorbachev's three reforms, none had a more immediate or destabilizing effect. Intended to rebuild public trust through transparency, glasnost instead opened the floodgates of memory and resentment. What had long been suppressed—famines, purges, gulags—was now headline material. The archives were opened, censored authors were republished, and journalists investigated state failures that had once been unspeakable. As Thompson explains, glasnost made it possible to examine topics that had long been taboo in Soviet discourse, such as the Stalinist purges and the Chernobyl disaster (Thompson 295–296). Rather than healing the past, this exposure hollowed out the Soviet mythos. Faith in the state—already brittle, collapsed under the weight of its revealed history.

The paradox of glasnost was that it succeeded too well. Allowing the public to speak, it also forced them to remember—and what they remembered was betrayal, repression, and hunger disguised as sacrifice. For the first time in Soviet history, citizens were not only aware of their government's failures—they were permitted to say them aloud. The Communist Party could no longer claim ideological purity or historical inevitability, and the moral foundation it had used to justify rule since 1917 began to disintegrate in real time. The state had spent decades presenting a "problem-free" reality, but as Gorbachev himself admitted, "a breach had formed between word

and deed," and decay had set in (Thompson 297). Glasnost did not simply destabilize public faith—it stripped the Party of its final pretense to moral authority.

Unlike the tsarist regime it replaced, the Soviet state developed no vocabulary for self-critique. Even the Romanovs, for all their brutality, had conceded to reform—Alexander II acknowledged that "it is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait until it begins to abolish itself from below" (Thompson 161). But in the decades after 1917, the Soviet system cast itself as the final chapter of history: infallible, triumphant, eternal. To admit failure was to admit illegitimacy. For generations, this meant silence—not just about Stalin's crimes, but about the very idea that the state could do wrong. Glasnost shattered that illusion. In lifting the veil, it did not merely confront the past—it destroyed the regime's claim to moral continuity. History, once frozen, began to move again—and it did not move in the Party's favor.

As the past was being unearthed by glasnost, the present was buckling under the weight of perestroika. Gorbachev had hoped that economic restructuring would revive a faltering system and restore material legitimacy where ideological claims had already collapsed. But the reforms, like the state itself, were riddled with contradictions. From the outset, Gorbachev insisted he was not abandoning socialism. He envisioned a "better-off, more efficient, but still socialist society" (Thompson 295). Yet what followed was neither coherent socialism nor functional central planning. The system had long since ceased to resemble anything doctrinal—what remained was a hollow bureaucratic machine, incapable of delivering goods or direction, now further destabilized by halfway reforms. By the late 1980s, the Soviet economy looked less like a workers' state than a prime candidate for a hostile takeover: bloated with inefficiency, hollowed out by corruption, and teetering on the edge of collapse. Central ministries issued plans no one

followed, while local managers were told to act independently, without the tools, freedom, or prices that made sense (Thompson 300). What emerged was a chaotic hybrid: doomed by design, defended by inertia.

Gorbachev's attempt to restructure the Soviet economy materialized through a wave of reforms—each promising efficiency, each unraveling into confusion. The most sweeping, the Law on the State Enterprise (1988), gave local managers nominal control over production, wages, and hiring, with the expectation that enterprises would become profitable and self-sustaining. But the prices they worked with were still centrally fixed and wildly unrealistic. "Sink or swim" was the mandate, but the state still held the pool (Thompson 298). A second measure introduced limited market contracts between economic units, which were meant to create competition and rational allocation. In practice, it simply meant hoarding and black-market side deals. A third reform legalized cooperative businesses in services and light industry, such as repair shops and restaurants. These co-ops were taxed heavily and charged uncontrolled prices far above the state norm, fueling inflation and inequality. Even basic goods remained scarce—by 1989, detergents and soap had vanished from shelves in Moscow and Leningrad (Thompson 299). A fourth initiative broke the state monopoly on trade and encouraged foreign investment and joint ventures, opening the Soviet economy to the outside world while providing little internal structure to manage or absorb that contact. Finally,

Gorbachev attempted modest reform in agriculture, allowing families to lease state land and "arrange their agricultural work on a contract basis," selling only a portion of their goods to the state and the rest at free market prices (Thompson 299). These efforts bore a clear resemblance to Lenin's New Economic Policy, which had introduced market incentives into the early Soviet

system under a strategic retreat from ideological rigidity. But where Lenin had the force of revolution and central control behind him, Gorbachev faced a fragmented system already eroded by bureaucratic drift and exposed to market forces without safeguards. The agricultural sector, like the rest of the economy, was still overmanaged, underproductive, and structurally incapable of self-correction. Thompson summarizes the fallout succinctly: “The tangible and quick benefits they had expected had not materialized, and many citizens felt they were in fact worse off than before” (Thompson 299). Perestroika did not energize the economy—it merely shifted the burden of failure down the chain, to workers, managers, and consumers who were given new responsibilities without new tools—a familiar arrangement under capitalist structures.

Ultimately, perestroika failed not just because the reforms were flawed, but because they were incomplete. Gorbachev introduced market logic without market mechanisms, decentralization without real autonomy. The result was paralysis. Central planners resisted change, local managers lacked authority, and workers saw no reason to adapt when prices rose and goods disappeared. As the economy faltered, so too did the public’s patience. In hindsight, the reforms looked less like a renewal of socialism and more like a soft dismantling of whatever was in its shadow—a laying of groundwork for the oligarchic seizure of the 1990s (Thompson 299–300).

Whether intended or not, perestroika stripped the system of its ideological and structural defenses, priming it for absorption into global capital. With trust in both production and Party evaporating, Gorbachev turned to political reform—not to democratize power from below, but to salvage control from above. Demokratizatsiya, his final reform, would open the system further—but it would also expose how little legitimacy the center still held. The very process meant to

legitimize the regime through participation instead highlighted how little there was left to participate in.

In retrospect, demokratizatsiya exposed the deeper fragility of any system that builds political participation around loyalty to a single party. Once the Party lost its grip—ideologically through glasnost, materially through perestroika—its institutions collapsed like scaffolding with nothing to support. The system had conditioned obedience, not civic engagement. It had outlawed alternatives, not out-argued them. In theory, demokratizatsiya was meant to widen political inclusion, introduce competitive elections, and stimulate popular engagement. In practice, it destabilized the hierarchy without replacing it. Elections were held, but the Party's legitimacy had already evaporated. New bodies appeared, but their power was uncertain and their authority questioned. As Thompson explains, the reforms "paved the way for adoption of a multiparty system," but they did so in a landscape stripped of ideological coherence or shared civic infrastructure (Thompson 307).

As Andrei Arvidus writes in the Davis Center's reflection on Gorbachev's legacy, his moral vision "collided with a political culture that rewarded compliance, not conviction" ("Mikhail Gorbachev: Magnificent Achievements, Monumental Failures," Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University, 2022). So when those alternatives finally emerged—whether nationalist, capitalist, or opportunist—they didn't need to offer solutions. They just had to be not-Communist. The result wasn't democratization; it was a scramble for power. And in that vacuum, the ones best positioned to seize control weren't the people, but the profiteers: well-connected apparatchiks and emerging oligarchs poised to privatize the wreckage. Russia, in that moment, wasn't the exception—it was a prototype. What collapsed in 1991 wasn't

just a regime, but a structure now eerily familiar: power shifting not through vision, but through whoever speaks the loudest in the void—and has the capital to make it echo.

By the time the August 1991 coup was staged against Gorbachev, the outcome barely mattered. His authority had eroded so completely—politically, economically, symbolically—that removing him felt less like a revolution and more like a boardroom ousting. He returned to office days later, but it was ceremonial. The real power had already moved elsewhere: into the hands of nationalist leaders, rising oligarchs, and opportunists ready to carve up the remains. The Soviet Union would dissolve within months, not with a bang, but with a press conference. The remaining republics were left to chart their own futures—some with hope, others with unease—all still deeply entangled in the wreckage of a superpower whose reach had collapsed but whose consequences endured.

In the end, the collapse of the Soviet Union wasn't televised as tragedy or triumph. It was rendered into spectacle—bite-sized, branded, and broadcast. The devolution was televised—as liquidation: the face of communism in the West, rebranded as the smiling mascot for the very system he once stood against—available for delivery.

Works Cited

Thompson, John M. *Russia and the Soviet Union: A Historical Introduction from the Kievan State to the Present*. 7th ed., Westview Press, 2013.

Arvidus, Andrei. *"Mikhail Gorbachev: Magnificent Achievements, Monumental Failures."* Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University, 2022. https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/mikhail-gorbachev-1931-2022-magnificent-achievements-monumental-failures.