

A Short History of the Soviet Union

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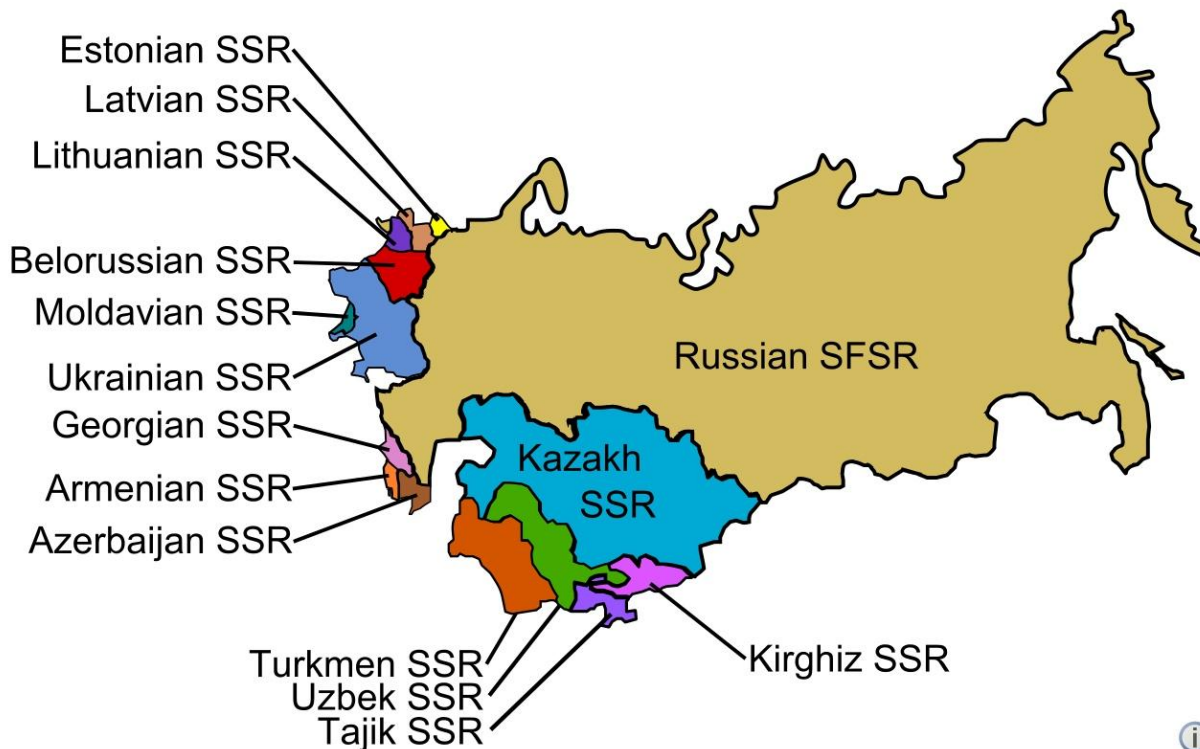
TOP: A Soviet propaganda poster from 1922 dedicated to the fifth anniversary of the October Revolution and Fourth Congress of the Communist International. BELOW: Map showing the republics of the Soviet Union prior to its dissolution. Images from: Wikimedia.

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.), or Soviet Union, was the first country to form a government based on the system known as communism. It only existed from 1922 to 1991. For much of that time, however, it was one of the most powerful countries in the world.

Land

The Soviet Union was the largest country that ever existed. It covered more than 8 million square miles in Europe and Asia. That's almost two and one half times the size of the United States.

The Soviet Union was made up of 15 republics, or countries. The largest and most powerful was the Russian republic, now called Russia. The republics are independent today and are now called Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The capital of the Soviet Union was Moscow, in Russia.



People

The Soviet Union had the world's third-largest population. More than 290 million people lived there. The country had more than 100 groups of different peoples. Ethnic Russians made up the largest group by far. Russian was the official language, but more than 200 other languages existed in the country.

The Soviet government did not approve of religion. Even so, the Russian Orthodox Christian church survived. There were also many Muslims in some republics. Muslims are followers of Islam.

During the time the Soviet Union existed, millions of people moved from farms to cities. By 1991, two out of every three Soviet citizens lived in a city.

Culture

The government of the Soviet Union controlled all parts of life in the country. The people were not allowed to speak openly to oppose the government. Artists and writers were allowed to say only good things about the Soviet system. The government put many of them in prison. Others left the country.

Economy

During its most powerful period, the Soviet Union had one of the world's strongest economies. It had plenty of money and managed it well. Agriculture, mining and heavy industry all made big contributions to national wealth. The government completed many large projects such as dams and canals.

According to communist teachings, individuals should not be allowed to own businesses. So the government owned almost all businesses and factories in the Soviet Union. Communist Party leaders decided what kinds of products would be made and how much the people would pay for them. Under this system, there were not enough of the products that people needed.

The communist system was also supposed to give farmers and workers a fair share of the country's wealth. However, farmers suffered greatly when the government took their land and created large farms called collective farms. By the 1970s, the Soviet Union had to buy food from other countries to feed its people.

History

Before the Soviet Union, the Russian Empire ruled Russia and some of the countries around it. Its leader was an emperor known as a czar. The Russian people had become angry with the tsar and Russia had also lost battles in World War I. The tsar was taken from power in a revolution that took place in 1917. Later in 1917 a group called the Bolsheviks came to power. This group, later renamed the Communist Party, fought other Russian groups in a civil war that lasted from 1918 to 1920. Vladimir Lenin led the communists, who won the war.

Early years

On Dec. 20, 1922, the communists created the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Russia was one of its republics. The other republics were mostly regions of the former Russian Empire. They were home to various non-Russian groups.

Lenin died in 1924. A few years later, a Communist Party leader named Joseph Stalin came to power. Stalin was one of the cruelest rulers who ever lived. He killed farmers who did not want collective farms. He sold crops to foreign countries and let his own people starve. During the 1930s, he caused as many as 10 million people in the Soviet Union to die.

World War II

In 1939, just before World War II began, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union secretly agreed not to attack each other. In June 1941, however, Germany broke the agreement and invaded the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union then joined the United States and Great Britain to fight Germany.

The Soviet Union suffered terribly during the war. By the time Germany surrendered in 1945 more than 20 million Soviet people had died.

Cold War

Even with all the damage it had suffered, the Soviet Union was still the greatest power in Europe after World War II. While fighting the Germans, Soviet troops moved into many countries in Eastern Europe. Between 1945 and 1948 the Soviets set up communist governments in these countries. They controlled these governments.

This activity worried many people in other countries, particularly the United States. Both countries built up their military forces. The conflict between them came to be known as the Cold War. In addition to building up their armies, both countries developed nuclear weapons. Many people were afraid that this would lead to nuclear war. But neither country ever used the weapons.

Conditions improved for the Soviet people following Stalin's death in 1953. Over the next few years Nikita Khrushchev came to power. Khrushchev introduced some changes that were good for people, but they angered other Communist Party leaders. In 1964, he was removed from power.

Breakup

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev came to power as the last leader of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev wanted to build a stronger economy and a freer society. He made changes that made Soviet citizens want even more freedom. Beginning in 1987, people in some of the Soviet republics began to demand greater independence.

In 1989, a series of almost completely peaceful revolutions began. The eastern European countries gained independence from Soviet control. During 1991, the Soviet republics also gained their independence. On the last day of 1991, the Soviet Union came to an end. Fifteen separate countries replaced it.

Quiz

- 1 Based on the article, which of the following is TRUE?
- (A) The leader of the Soviet Union after the civil war with the Bolsheviks was called a czar.
 - (B) The people of the Soviet Union all spoke the Russian language and had the same religion.
 - (C) The Soviet Union had a poor economy that slowly improved as the government gained experience.
 - (D) The relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union changed after World War II.
- 2 Which selection from the article BEST supports the idea that the Soviet government made strict rules to control what people did?
- (A) The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.), or Soviet Union, was the first country to form a government based on the system known as communism.
 - (B) The Soviet government did not approve of religion. Even so, the Russian Orthodox Christian church survived.
 - (C) Artists and writers were allowed to say only good things about the Soviet system. The government put many of them in prison.
 - (D) While fighting the Germans, Soviet troops moved into many countries in Eastern Europe. Between 1945 and 1948 the Soviets set up communist governments in these countries.
- 3 What is the relationship between the sections "History" and "Early Years"?
- (A) "History" explains a problem with the Soviet Union and "Early Years" describes how the country's government solved it.
 - (B) "History" explains what caused the communists to gain power and "Early Years" describes effects of their leadership.
 - (C) "History" gives different opinions of the Soviet government and "Early Years" gives facts about the government.
 - (D) "History" describes early problems of communist government and "Early Years" describes later achievements.

- 4 Overall, the article is organized around:
- (A) important wars of a country and how many people lived there
 - (B) important events of a country and what the country was like
 - (C) important leaders of a country and how they are remembered
 - (D) important successes of a country and how the country changed the world