

THE FALL OF THE SOVIET UNION



Moscow's Red Square

Unit Overview

Almost no one born in the 1950s could have envisioned a world without the Soviet Union. It had challenged the West and its allies politically, militarily and philosophically for over forty years. However, the Soviets could not match the production levels of the United States and Western Europe. Attempts at reform only encouraged a spirit of nationalism and increased revolutions inside and outside Soviet borders. Let's see how it all happened.

Timeline of Events	
1964	Leonid Brezhnev became the leader of the Soviet Union.
1968	Soviet forces intervene in Czechoslovakia
1979	Soviet forces intervene in Afghanistan
1984	Leonid Brezhnev died.
1985	Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union.
1986	The Chernobyl nuclear disaster occurred.
1991	The Soviet Union collapsed.
1998	Muslims in Chechnya rebelled.
2000	Vladimir Putin was elected as president of the Russian Federation.
2014	Russian troops intervened in Ukraine.

STOP: Answer Section A Questions

Life in a Command Economy

Following World War II, the Soviet Union faced the challenge of rebuilding its devastated industries. Unlike the West, the Soviets operated under a **command economy**. The government decided what to produce, how much to produce and for whom to produce it. In the communist system, this replaced **the law of supply and demand**. By the 1950s, the manufacture of steel and heavy equipment represented the nation's top priorities. The government also poured the country's financial resources into scientific research and technical advancement. The Soviets wanted to prove that their system was superior to that of the United States.

Although unemployment was practically nonexistent and housing costs were low, the Soviet economy was plagued by serious problems. The practice of organizing agricultural production through large units called **collective farms** failed to meet demand. As a result, the Soviet Union was forced to import grain to feed its people. The nation's command economy was not able to keep pace with the free market economies of the West in the quantity and quality of its consumer goods. Soviet shoppers waited in long lines to buy groceries. The selection of clothing was very limited. Although they had lifetime job security, workers were only rewarded for meeting production quotas and had little incentive to improve the quality of their products.



Soviet Poster Promoting Collective Farming

STOP: Answer Section B Questions

The Brezhnev Era

The Cuban Missile Crisis ended the political career of Nikita Khrushchev and brought his successor **Leonid Brezhnev** to power. As leader of the Soviet Union from 1964 until his death in 1982, Brezhnev ordered a massive military buildup in response to what he believed had been a humiliating defeat in Cuba. His regime clamped down on anyone who opposed his policies, including **Alexander Solzhenitsyn**, winner of the Nobel Prize in literature. Critics faced arrest, imprisonment and, in some cases, exile. The **Soviet Communist Party** strictly controlled the media and limited basic civil rights.



Leonid Brezhnev

Brezhnev's firm hand extended into **Eastern Europe**. In 1968, a group of reformers within the Czechoslovakian Communist Party won a majority in the country's legislature and proposed a series of liberal reforms. Because these developments frightened hardline communists, Brezhnev ordered 500,000 Soviet troops to **Czechoslovakia** and effectively intimidated the reformist element. This resulted in the **Brezhnev Doctrine** in which the Soviet Union gave itself permission to intervene militarily in the affairs of any **Warsaw Pact** nation. The same determination to secure its borders led to the invasion of **Afghanistan** under Brezhnev's leadership in 1979. As part of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union competed for allies among the developing nations of Asia and Africa. These military exploits further extended the Soviet Union's thinly stretched financial status. Before Brezhnev died, efforts were underway to improve the country's economic performance and to eliminate corruption in the Soviet bureaucracy. However, it would up to the next Soviet leader to carry out these reforms.

STOP: Answer Section C Questions

Gorbachev and the Reform Movement

In 1985, **Mikhail Gorbachev**, known for his intelligence, personality and determination, became the leader of the Soviet Union. Although he was a firm

believer in communism, Gorbachev realized that certain aspects of the system were failing. Reform was essential if the state was going to be saved. He recognized the importance of better relations with the West and the economic advantage of ending the wasteful arms race with the United States. His first series of reforms, known as **perestroika**, was designed to restructure the economy by making room for some private enterprise and relaxing government price controls. He thought that this would enable the Soviet companies to produce more consumer goods of better quality.

Under the new system, factory managers made decisions that had formerly been in the hands of government planners. To address the issue of inadequate food supplies, farmers were allotted more land and were permitted to sell the crop on the free market. Gorbachev and his associates knew that these reforms would create short-term havoc but hoped that the measures would result in long-term success. As expected, Gorbachev's changes created an economic upheaval in the Soviet Union. Some factories found that they could not survive without government support, and these closings increased unemployment. Prices rose, shortages increased and criticism intensified. Old-school communists insisted that the reforms had gone too far, while politicians like **Boris Yeltsin** claimed that they had not gone far enough.



A Soviet Stamp Commemorating Perestroika

The economic restructuring was followed by **glasnost**, a policy which encouraged open, public discussions and eased the rules of censorship for the media. This sparked a spirit of nationalism in non-Russian minorities across the Soviet empire.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had once been republics but were seized by Russia in 1940. They became fully independent in 1991. After Gorbachev renounced the Brezhnev Doctrine, the peaceful reunification of Germany and the liberation of Eastern Europe from Soviet dominance soon followed. In other foreign policy matters, Gorbachev ordered the removal of all Soviet forces from Afghanistan. He also negotiated an agreement with the United States to scale back the numbers of nuclear weapons held by both countries.

These changes deepened the resentment of traditional communists. Therefore, they planned to remove Gorbachev from office through a **coup**. Although this maneuver was unsuccessful, it weakened the leader's already precarious position. **Boris Yeltsin**, Gorbachev's long-time rival, and his political allies declared Russia's independence. They withdrew Russia from the Soviet Union and announced the formation of the **Russian Federation**. When other republics quickly followed, Gorbachev resigned as president, and the Soviet Union ended its existence on December 25, 1991. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States emerged as the world's lone superpower.



Chernobyl Nuclear Reactor Following the Disaster: October, 1986

Along with major political change and economic turmoil, the Soviet Union also experienced a major environmental disaster in 1986. On April 26, a full-scale

meltdown took place at Reactor No. 4 at the **Chernobyl** nuclear plant located near **Prypyat**, a city in the Russian republic of Ukraine. The meltdown ignited an explosion several times larger than those unleashed at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It also released a huge number of radioactive particles into the air. Thirty-two people died initially, and dozens of others were sickened due to exposure. Over 200,000 people living within twenty miles of the facility had to be evacuated. Fallout reached several European nations. Ukraine, Belarus and Russia have reported unusually high rates of thyroid cancer as scientists continue to monitor the effects of the contamination.

STOP: Answer Section D Questions

The Russian Republic

Russian president Boris Yeltsin believed that change had to be enacted quickly if the new republic was going to avoid a return to communism. He began by privatizing more state-run industries and collective farms. Once again, unemployment rose, and prices increased. For older Russians who lived on pensions, this was an especially difficult time. Some industrialists, however, prospered under the new system. Their success further widened the financial gap between the rich and the poor. The country's fiscal problems were compounded by the fact that the Russians had little experience with republican government. For centuries, Russian political life had first been dominated by autocratic tsars and then by the communist party. The new political parties had no background in democratic traditions. Russia did not have an established court system and legal code to deal adequately with corruption and crime. This became a serious problem as gang activity and crime flourished.



Map Showing the Location of Chechnya

Conditions went from bad to worse in 1998 when Russia defaulted on much of its foreign debt. This failure to meet loan payments caused the value of the **ruble**, the country's main unit of currency, to collapse. As banks and businesses closed, Russians could do little but watch as their savings evaporated. Between 1992 and 2001, the Russian economy declined over 30%. Confidence in the government also plummeted when Yeltsin failed to solve the crisis. This contributed to the increasing demands by minority groups within Russia for independence. Violence erupted in Russia's **Chechnya** region in 1998 when Muslims, who had lived in this area of the Caucasus Mountains for centuries, rebelled. This was accompanied by several terrorist attacks on **Moscow**, the Russian capital. Boris Yeltsin resigned under pressure in 1999. **Vladimir Putin**, once a member of the Soviet secret police, was named as acting president. In the following year, Putin was elected president through the first free elections in Russian history.



Vladimir Putin Speaking in Moscow's Red Square

During his years in office, Putin became more authoritarian in his approach, and his leadership has some similarities to communist party rule. Since he took office, restrictions have been placed on the press, and several industries have been nationalized. He was also responsible for a brutal campaign against the **separatist movement** in Chechnya. Defining the rebellion as part of the global war on terror, Putin ordered Russian troops to destroy all Chechen opposition to Russian rule. The conflict resulted in the deaths of over 200,000 civilians, the destruction of the region's infrastructure and the flight of thousands of refugees. The Chechens, however, continued their resistance. Ukraine also became a hotspot in 2014 when Putin intervened militarily on behalf of Russian separatists.

Putin, who has served multiple terms as both president and prime minister, has been criticized nationally and internationally for his autocratic decisions. Meanwhile, Russia still houses the one of the world's largest stockpile of nuclear weapons. This demands that the rest of the world deal with the Russians on a diplomatic level and through collaboration. The collapse of the Soviet Union triggered a worldwide fear that nuclear technology, toxic chemicals and biological agents would be stolen from poorly guarded Soviet labs and sold to the highest bidders. Recognizing the potential threat this posed, treaties and agreements have been negotiated to limit the production, use and possession of these weapons.

STOP: Answer Section E Questions

What Does It All Mean?

The fall of the Soviet Union brought an abrupt end to the Cold War and eliminated one of the two superpowers. For the United States, the victory was short-lived as the old enemy was soon replaced with a war on terror. For the small nations of Eastern Europe, it seemed nothing short of a miracle. After World War I, these countries gained their independence only to be overrun by the Germans during World War II. Soviet domination quickly followed. Some nations enjoyed a peaceful transition; others would experience violence and upheaval.

Additional Resources and Activities



[Main Points Worksheet](#)

[A Short History of the Soviet Union Article and Quiz](#)

[World Leaders: Vladimir Putin Article and Quiz](#)