

Did Revolution or Regime Implosion End the Soviet Union?

Written by Timothy Frayne

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TIMOTHY FRAYNE, JUN 15 2012

Were the events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989-1991 the products of popular revolution or the products of regime implosion?

On the 25 December 1991, the resignation of President Mikhail Gorbachev marked the end of the Soviet Union and its seventy-four yearlong attempt to create an alternative social order (Sakwa, 2008). By the time that Gorbachev came to power in March 1985, the USSR was suffering from a number of serious political, social and economic issues that required the immediate attention of the new General Secretary.[1] In order to fully understand the events that transpired during the period of 1989-1991, it is imperative that we take into account both the actions and inactions of Gorbachev's government prior to and throughout the years in question. Historians and political scientists alike have attempted to explain why the Soviet Union collapsed, with Adam Ulam stating, 'that in 1985, no government of a major state appeared to be as firmly in power, its policies as clearly set in their course, as that of the USSR' (Aron, 2011). From Ulam's observations of 1985, and the apparent lack of evidence for the Soviet Union's complete collapse, we can deduce that something went seriously wrong between 1985 and 1991. However, it is clear from the rest of the world's failure to predict the unravelling of the USSR that the causes for collapse are not as obvious as many would like to think.

The following will look at a number of key events that took place during Gorbachev's period, including the impacts of 'reform communism' (Sakwa, 2008), and Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness), the role of popular dissent, such as the unrest amongst the nationalities, and finally, the importance of 'regime implosion' and the impact of the August Coup and its role in the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Ben Fowkes (1997) argues that one of the main factors behind the collapse of the Soviet Union was the implementation of democratic reforms such as *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*. He goes on to quote Leonid Kravchuk, the first President of independent Ukraine, as having said that 'the disintegration of the Soviet Union could be traced to the beginning of the period of *perestroika* - and we know exactly who the author of this breakup was' (Fowkes, 1997). This suggests, that although popular dissent may have been a reaction to the process of reform, that arguably, the initial unravelling of Soviet power and the Union's ultimate collapse was initiated and caused by Gorbachev and his attempts to reform the USSR. Dmitri Volkogonov discusses the process of reform under *perestroika* in a similar light, highlighting the importance of *glasnost* in the decline and eventual disintegration of Soviet power. He suggests, whilst being Gorbachev's greatest achievement, *glasnost*, and the process of increasing public access to information, despite being created by Gorbachev, continued to evolve uncontrollably regardless of any decisions that he made (Volkogonov, 1999). Volkogonov (1999) then continues on to state that, 'the system based on the class lie was destroyed from within by *glasnost*'.

It appears that Gorbachev was in an unwinnable political situation, with the increased freedom of information and the step by step removal of censorship simultaneously unleashing critical forces and denying Gorbachev the support that he desperately needed (Sunny, 1998). In an attempt to hold a centrist position, preventing a return to a conservative led Party or its complete liquidation by radicals, Gorbachev effectively alienated both camps. He was accused of failing to maintain socialism and the Party by conservatives, such as Yegor Ligachev, and criticised for not going far

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or fast enough in reforming the political system by the radical elements led Boris Yeltsin (Suny, 1998). *Glasnost* effectively undermined Gorbachev's ability to act decisively in solving the Union's problems, if he was in fact capable of doing so anyway, and brought the legitimacy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) under question. His failure to control the situation that he had created, and the growing public rejection of the system due to the exposure of past crimes, was a result of attempts to reform and liberalise both society and the political system. This series of events strongly suggests that Gorbachev, and his failure to direct the CPSU towards any kind of universal agreement on reform, was critical in the collapse of Soviet authority, with the greater freedoms given to the public only acting as a catalyst for its disintegration. From this it is clear that a significant proportion of the USSR's problems were in fact created by divisions within the Party and ill-conceived reform attempts by Gorbachev, implying 'regime implosion' and not 'popular revolution'.

However, one of the most damaging effects of *glasnost* was the crisis that it awakened amongst the nationalities. This represented a problem that had previously been effectively managed by the application of coercion and the use of the KGB and police forces (Gitelman, 1992), but with the implementation of *glasnost* this was no longer possible. Topics that had previously been forbidden to discuss in public were openly debated in the Republics, with subjects such as, to what extent the Baltic nations should be independent, language and cultural rights, where the Union's decision making should take place, and the extent to which the more developed countries should subsidise the less developed, all becoming questions prominently discussed in the public sphere (Lapidus, 1989). The result of which was a wave of popular demonstrations, demands for sovereignty and the complete loss of Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania to nationalist revolutions in 1989.

The events of 1989 and the loss of '*Stalin's Empire*' (Suny, 1998), whilst caused most immediately by what is considered 'popular revolution', could also be suggested were only possible because of the Soviet policies adopted towards the region, with Gorbachev responding to a question in 1989 on the chances of the Berlin Wall coming down by stating that, 'nothing is eternal in this world' (Suny, 1998). Gorbachev's belief that the nationality issue could not '...be resolved by force' (Gorbachev, 1996) and his clear rejection of the *Brezhnev Doctrine*, meant that without the implied threat of military intervention the CPSU was in no position to maintain control of the Central European Republics (Sebestyen, 2009). It was this factor, it could be argued, that allowed for the Polish Solidarity movement to force the Party to relinquish power on June 4 1989, and the fifty-thousand strong demonstration in East Germany that led to the collapse of Erich Honecker's regime and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall on October 18 1989, only twelve days after Gorbachev had made it clear in an address to the East German people that the Soviet Union would not support the regime with troops (Suny, 1998).

Although the impact of 'popular revolution' is most obvious in the effects on the satellite states previously mentioned, the Soviet Union itself was not unaffected by popular unrest in this period, with the strongest nationalist movements emerging in the Baltic Republics, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Western Ukraine (Suny, 1998). *Glasnost* revealed the true nature of the Baltics incorporation into the USSR, exposing it as a product of the carving up of Europe by Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939, stimulating the regions demand for independence (Gorbachev, 1996). On the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi-Soviet Pact on August 23 1989, there was mass demonstration in the Baltic Republics. Central Party members responded by declaring that 'things have gone too far', but once again, Gorbachev's reluctance to use force prevailed (Suny, 1998). Similar instances of popular unrest was prevalent in this period throughout the USSR, including Russia, forcing Gorbachev to reassess the nature of the Union and commit to the creation of a New Union Treaty, considering it to be the only way to save the Soviet Union (Gorbachev, 1996). The treaty would have effectively and irreversibly transformed the USSR into a 'sovereign federative state' based on 'voluntary' membership (Pravda, 1999), undermining the traditionally unquestionable authority of the CPSU. Although popular unrest was apparent in both the satellite states and the Soviet Union during 1989-1991, it is clear in all cases, however, that without Gorbachev's refusal to use the USSR's military strength to suppress the unrest in the Republics, it is unlikely that any of the nationalist movements would have been anywhere near as effective.

It could be argued that the event that most immediately precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union was the Coup of August 1991. Whilst being the product of a number of other factors, the Coup is a clear example of how 'regime implosion' played a prominent role in the downfall of the USSR. The increasing strength of radical liberal forces, open criticism of the CPSU, and the loss of legitimacy and position, all acted to alienate and marginalise the role of the

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traditional conservative element within the Party, and arguably the Party itself, forcing some of the Party's hard-line individuals to take the drastic measures seen from the 19-21 August 1991.

Many have accredited the Union's demise to the Coup, with Boris Yeltsin (1994) arguing in his account of events, *'The Struggle for Russia'*, that the failure of the Soviet Union can be directly linked with the August Coup. The Coup represented the reaction of the conservative elements of the CPSU to the increasingly uncontrollable reform programme that was rapidly surrendering the position and authority of the Communist Party in favour of the democratisation of politics and the liberalisation of society. Gorbachev (1991) noted that, 'the attempted Coup was a reaction to... the new treaty on the Union of Sovereign States', a treaty that would have finally and undoubtedly relinquished the unquestionable central authority of the Party. Yeltsin supported this theory during the Coup, addressing the people on the 20 August 1991 arguing that: "The Coup took place on 19 August. The date – this is absolutely clear – was chosen not at random: the last day before the signing of the new Union Treaty. The treaty which, despite all the compromises would have put an end to the absolute power of the CPSU and the military-industrial complex." (Yeltsin, 1999)

With this in mind, it is clear that the Coup was not an attempt to preserve 'bureaucratic socialism', but instead aimed at the preservation of Soviet patriotism (Fowkes, 1997). This is obvious from the conspirator's failure to mention either socialism, the CPSU, or class struggle in their press statements, instead focusing on the importance of maintaining law and order (Fowkes, 1997). In a statement made to the public by the Emergency Committee that had been set up by the Coup leaders, they specified that the purpose of the Coup was to prevent and remedy the: "Profound and comprehensive crisis, political and civil conflict, the confrontation between nationalities, and the chaos and anarchy that threatens the lives and security of the citizens of the Soviet Union and the Sovereignty, territorial integrity, freedom and independence of our fatherland." (Emergency Committee, 1999)

Despite this, it is important to recognise that regardless of the Coup's intentions, it clearly represents the culmination of divisions within the CPSU and could be considered the result of 'regime implosion'.

However, although the Coup may have been an example of Party infighting and the disintegration of Gorbachev's control, the response of the people to the Coup's attempts to undo the democrat development that had already taken place within the Soviet union, it could be argued, is more representative of what could be described as a 'popular revolution'. Yeltsin acted swiftly in declaring his opposition to the attempted seizure of power, responding to the Coup leaders '*appeal to the Soviet people*' by setting up an opposition camp within the White House, where he was rapidly supported and surrounded by thousands of spontaneous supporters determined to protect the continued democratic reform of the country (Yeltsin, et al., 1999). From this it is clear, that while the people may not have been directly rallying behind or supporting either Gorbachev or Yeltsin, it is evidence of the strong public consciousness that had evolved during Gorbachev's period in office and the populations new found willingness to defend its newly acquired freedoms.

Regardless of the support that rallied around Yeltsin and his open defiance, initial reaction to the Coup was divided. The referendum held on the future of the USSR and opinion polls held both during and after the events of the 19-23 of August 1991, suggest that a substantial proportion of the population, especially in the nine republics, were sympathetic to the expressed goals of the Emergency Committee, displaying an apparent willingness on the part of the people to see an alternative leadership capable of dealing with the problems affecting the Soviet Union (Acton & Stableford, 2007). It could be argued, that it was not a lack of support that undermined the success of the Coup, or overwhelming public opposition for that matter, instead it was the Emergency committee's failure to effectively consolidate its position. Gorbachev (1996) claims in his memoirs that after his refusal to comply with their demands he noticed a loss of resolve and confidence, with some even suggesting that they stop and Dmitry Yazov allegedly having said, 'what the hell possessed me, old fool, to get involved in this mess!'.

Although there was obviously support for Yeltsin and his stand against a return to the pre-Gorbachev system, it is apparent that its role in the failure of the Coup came secondary to the inadequacies of the Coup members and their inability to carry through what they had begun. The Emergency Committees failure to gain public confidence, find an alternative rhetoric to the discredited traditional Soviet discourse, and their inability to control the armed forces and

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detain important individuals such as Yeltsin, once again points towards 'regime implosion' rather than a 'popular revolution' (Acton & Stableford, 2007).

When trying to decipher whether the events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989-1991 were the products of 'popular revolution' or the products of 'regime implosion', it is important to recognise the different set of circumstance that were present in the satellite states in 1989 and the Soviet Union in 1991. It could be argued, that the revolutions in Eastern Europe, whilst appearing to be the result of 'popular revolution', were in fact dictated by the policies of the CPSU, or more accurately, Gorbachev. With this being the case it is difficult to see the events of 1989 as a 'popular revolution', as in reality there was no significant opposition to their so-called revolutions. However, in the Soviet Union it could be suggested that the collapse of the USSR was almost entirely based on the 'regime implosion' taking place within the CPSU. The political system was ill-prepared for the process of reform and its rapid developments, resulting in the major divisions of the Party along the lines of *perestroika*. As a result, the situation rapidly got out of control leading to public unrest, the Coup and the Soviet Union's rapid collapse.

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[1] Later becoming the first, and last, president of the Soviet Union on the 15 March 1990.