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# What Explains the Collapse of the USSR?

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/06/21/the-collapse-of-the-ussr-ontological-conjunctural-or-decisional/

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**A Critical Analysis into the Different Approaches Explaining the Collapse of the Soviet Union: Was the Nature of the Regime's Collapse Ontological, Conjunctural or Decisional?**

**Abstract**

This investigation seeks to explore the different approaches behind the demise of the Soviet Union. It will draw from Richard Sakwa's three approaches with regards to the collapse of the Soviet Union, namely of the ontological, decisional and conjunctural varieties. This dissertation will ultimately demonstrate the necessity of each of these if a complete understanding of the demise is to be acquired.

This dissertation will be split into three different areas of scrutiny with each analysing a different approach. The first chapter will question what elements of the collapse were ontological and will consist of delving into long-term socio-economic and political factors in order to grasp what structural flaws hindered the Soviet Union from its inception. Following this will be an analysis of the decisional approach, this time focusing on short-term factors and how the decisions of Gorbachev contributed to the fall. Finally, this investigation will examine the conjunctural approach, which will provide valuable insight as to how short-term political contingent factors played a leading role in the eventual ruin of the Soviet Union.

## Introduction

On December 26th, 1991, the Soviet Union was officially dissolved into fifteen independent republics after six years of political-economic crises. This unanticipated collapse of a super-power that had once shaped the foreign policies of East and West took the international community off-guard. Since the collapse, scholars have attempted to provide insight into the reasons behind the demise of the Soviet state. In 1998 Richard Sakwa published*Soviet Politics in Perspective*, which categorised the three main approaches adopted by scholars in the study of the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). These were the ontological, decisional and conjunctural approaches and will be the foci of this investigation. Ultimately, my aim is to prove that none of these approaches can thoroughly explain the collapse when viewed individually.

Instead, I will advance that all three are vital in order to acquire a thorough understanding of the Soviet collapse. To prove this, I will be analysing how each approach covers different angles of the fall, but before being able to answer this question of validity, I must begin by arranging each scholar I scrutinize into Sakwa's three approaches. In my research I have discovered that the vast majority of scholars have no notion of such schools of thought, which increases the possibility of bias in secondary sources and makes my investigation all the more challenging. Once a solid theoretical basis is set I will then move onto investigating the legitimacy of each approach when considering historical events.

*Research Questions*

To provide the basis for my hypothesis, my analysis will be subdivided into three research questions.

The first one will address what ontological traits existed in the collapse of the Soviet Union. Following this, the second question will mirror the first by attempting to make sense of decisional aspects of the fall. Finally, my attention will turn to answering in what way was the collapse conjunctural in nature. Although the characteristics of these questions may seem basic it is important not to fall prey to appearances and bear in mind the complexity of each approach. Moreover, the arrangement and formulation of the research questions was carried out in this manner to provide an unbiased evaluation of each approach, eventually displaying the necessity of each in the explanation of fall.

*Methodology*

The fall of the Soviet Union is a subject that has attracted vast amounts of literature from scholars all over the world. Although this presents a challenge when it comes to working through such a large topic it also helps the researcher elaborate solid explanations behind historical events. Consequently, I will be mainly employing qualitative data, supplemented by quantitative evidence; which will consist of both primary and secondary sources. The quantitative information will draw from various economists such as Lane, Shaffer and Dyker; these will mainly be used to ensure that qualitative explanations are properly backed by statistical data regarding socio-economic factors.

The majority of the qualitative data drawn will be from secondary sources written by contemporary scholars. A few primary sources such as official documents will also be analysed to provide further depth to analysis. Due to the vast amount of information concerning my topic, it is important to focus on literature aiding the question as one can easily deviate from the question regarding the three approaches. The other main challenge will also consist in avoiding to be drawn into deep analysis of the separate independence movements of the Soviet republics.

*Theoretical Framework*

Before being able to embark on a complete literature review, it is important to understand the theoretical framework that accompanies the analysis, namely Sakwa's three approaches. Subsequently, I will then be able to show that all three of these approaches are necessary in explaining the downfall of the Soviet Union.

When looking at the different approaches elaborated by Sakwa, each advances a unique hypothesis as to why the Soviet Union collapsed. Although all three approaches are different in nature, some overlap or inter-connect at times. To begin with, the ontological approach argues that the Soviet Union "dissolved because of certain inherent shortcomings of the system […] including […] structural flaws."[1] This approach enhances the premise that the collapse of the Soviet Union lies in long-term systemic factors that were present since the conception of the system. This view is countered by the conjunctural approach, which suggests

"that the system did have an evolutionary potential that might have allowed it in time to adapt to changing economic and political circumstances. […] The collapse of the system [is] ascribed to contingent factors, including the strength of internal party opposition [and] the alleged opportunism of the Russian leadership under Boris Yeltsin."[2]

The final approach theorised by Sakwa is the decisional one, and advances the belief that

"particular decisions at particular times precipitated the collapse, but that these political choices were made in the context of a system that could only be made viable through transformation of social, economic and political relations. This transformation could have been a long-term gradual process, but required a genuine understanding of the needs of the country."[3]

Although the decisional and conjunctural approaches are different in scope, they nevertheless both focus on the short-term factors of collapse, which at times may cause confusions. As both approaches analyse the same time frame, certain factors behind the collapse may be logically attributed to both. A relevant example may be seen when a contingent factor (factions within the Communist Party) affects the decisions of a leader (Gorbachev). This leads to ambiguities, as it is impossible to know whether certain outcomes should be explained in a conjunctural or decisional light. This type of ambiguity can also cast doubts on certain conjunctural phenomena with historical antecedents. In

these cases it becomes unclear as to whether these phenomena are ontological (structural), as they existed since the system's conception or conjunctural as they present contingent obstacles to progress.

In most cases, when ambiguities arise, scholars may adopt a rhetoric that is inherently ontological, decisional or conjunctural and then base most of their judgements and analysis around it. Kalashnikov supplements this, stating that "studies tend to opt for one factor as being most important in bringing about collapse […] [and] do not engage other standpoints."[4] This is a trait I have noticed in certain works that were written by scholars more inclined to analyse events through a certain approach, such as Kotkin with the ontological approach, Goldman with the decisional one, or Steele regarding the conjunctural approach. In my analysis, I will scrutinise the fall through the theoretical lens of each approach, and from this will prove the indispensability of each of these in the explanation of the downfall. The fact that certain approaches overlap is testament to the necessity of this theoretical categorisation.

**Literature Review**

The first approach to be investigated will be the ontological one: a school of thought espoused by scholars who focus on systemic long-term factors of collapse. Kotkin is one such author, providing valuable insight into the ontological dissolution of Soviet ideology and society, which will figure as the first element of analysis in that chapter. He advances the theory that the Soviet Union was condemned from an early age due to its ideological duty in providing a better alternative to capitalism. "From its inception, the Soviet Union had claimed to be an experiment in socialism […]. If socialism was not superior to capitalism, its existence could not be justified."[5] Kotkin elaborates that ideological credibility crumbled from the beginning as the USSR failed to fulfil expectations during Stalin's post-war leadership. Kotkin goes on and couples ideological deterioration with emphasis on societal non-reforming tendency that flourished after the 1921 ban on factions, setting a precedent where reform was ironically seen as a form of anti-revolutionary dissidence.

Kenez and Sakwa also supplement the above argument with insight on the suppression of critical political thinking, notably in Soviet satellite states, showing that any possibility of reforming towards a more viable Communist rhetoric was stifled early on and continuously supressed throughout the 1950s and 60s. This characteristic of non-reform can be seen as an ontological centre-point, as after the brutal repression seen in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968), no feedback mechanism existed wherein leadership could comprehend the social, political and economic problems that were gradually amassing. "The invasion of 1968 represented the destruction of the sources of renewal within the Soviet system itself."[6] Consequently, this led the Kremlin into a state of somewhat ignorance vis-à-vis the reality of life in the Soviet Union. Adding to the explanation of the Soviet Union's ontological demise, Sakwa links the tendency of non-reform to the overlapping of party and polity that occurred in the leadership structure of the USSR. "The CPSU was in effect a parallel administration, shadowing the official departments of state: a party-state emerged undermining the functional adaptability of both."[7] Sakwa then develops that this led to the 'mis-modernisation' of the command structure of the country, and coupled with non-reform, contributed to its demise. Furthermore, ontologically tending scholars also view the republican independence movements of the USSR as a factor destined to occur since the conception of the union.

The second section concerning the ontological approach analyses the economic factors of collapse. Here, Derbyshire, Kotkin and Remnick provide a quantitative and qualitative explanation of the failure of centralisation in the agricultural and industrial sectors. Derbyshire and Remnick also provide conclusive insight into ontological reasons for the failure of industrial and agricultural collectivization, which played a leading role in the overall demise of the Soviet Union.

Finally, in my third area of investigation, Remnick and Sakwa claim that the dissolution came about due to widespread discontent in individual republics regarding exploitation of their natural resources as well as Stalin's detrimental policy of pitting different republics against each other.

"Moscow had turned all of Central Asia into a vast cotton plantation […] [and in] the Baltic States, the official 'discovery' of the secret protocols to the Nazi-Soviet pact was the key moment."[8]

Although I will explore how independence movements played a role in the dissolution, I will ensure the focus remains on the USSR as a whole, as it is easy to digress due to the sheer amount of information on independence movements. Upon this, although evidence proves that certain factors of collapse were long-term ontological ones, other scholars, namely Goldman and Galeotti go in another direction and accentuate that the key to understanding the downfall of the USSR lies in the analysis of short-term factors such as the decisional approach.

Dissimilar to the ontological approach, within the decisional realm, scholars more frequently ascribe the factors of the collapse to certain events or movements, which allows them to have minute precision in their explanations of the fall. Goldman is a full-fledged decisional scholar with the conviction that Gorbachev orchestrated the collapse through "his lack of comprehensive approach,"[9] a view espousing Sakwa's definition of the decisional approach. In order to allow for a comprehensive analysis, this chapter will start off with an examination of Gorbachev's economic reforms in chronological order, allowing the reader to be guided through the decisions that affected the collapse. Goldman will be the main literary pillar of this section, supplemented by Sakwa and Galeotti. Having accomplished this, it will be possible to investigate how economic failure inter-linked with political decisions (Glasnost and Perestroika) outside of the Party created an aura of social turmoil. Here, Galeotti and Goldman will look into the events and more importantly, the decisions, that discredited Gorbachev's rule and created disillusion in Soviet society. My final section of the chapter will scrutinize the affects of Glasnost and Perestroika within the Communist Party, which will stand as a primordial step in light of the independence movements; seen as a by-product of Gorbachev's policies. Due to the inter-linked nature of the political, social and economic spheres, it will be possible to see how policy sectors affected each other in the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Overall, this chapter will end with an analysis of how Gorbachev's incoherence pushed certain republics onto the path of independence, which is perceived as a major factor behind the fall by Goldman.

In the chapter regarding the conjunctural approach, I will be looking into the key contingent factors that scholars believe are behind the fall of the Soviet Union. The first will be the conservatives of the Communist Party who obstructed the reform process since Brezhnev's rule, meaning that up until the collapse, "reform efforts had run headlong into the opposition of entrenched bureaucratic interests who resisted any threat to their power."[10] Due to the broadness of this topic I will draw from two scholars, namely Kelley and Remnick, for supplementary insight. Moving on, I will also investigate the inception of the reformist left, a term encapsulating those within and outside the party striving to bring democratic reform to the USSR. Here the main conjunctural scholar used will be Steele, who explains that Gorbachev's hopes for this reformist left to support him against the Communist conservatives evaporated once Yeltsin took the lead and crossed the boundaries of 'socialist pluralism' set by Gorbachev. A concept coined by the leader himself, which implied "that there should be a wide exchange of views and organizations, provided they all accepted socialism."[11] This brought about enormous pressure and sapped social support from Gorbachev at a time when he needed political backing. Once the political scene is evaluated through conjunctural evidence, I will divide my chapter chronologically, first exploring the 1989 radicalisation of the political movements with the significant arrival of Yeltsin as the major obstacle to Gorbachev's reforms to the left. In this section I will be mainly citing Remnick due to his detailed accounts of events. Ultimately I will be attempting to vary my analysis with approach-specific scholars and more neutral ones who provide thorough accounts, such as Remnick's and Sakwa's. The analysis will continue with insight in the 1990-1991 period of political turmoil and the effects it had on Gorbachev's reforms; I will be citing Galeotti, Remnick and Tedstrom as these provide varying viewpoints regarding political changes of the time. My chapter will then finally end with a scrutiny of Yeltsin's Democratic Russia and the August 1991 Coup and how both of these independent action groups operated as mutual contingent factors in the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

**Chapter One: Was the Collapse of the USSR Ontological in Nature?**

When analysing the collapse of the USSR, it is undeniable that vital ontological problems took form during the early days of its foundation. Here I will analyse these flaws and demonstrate how the collapse occurred due to ontological reasons, hence proving the necessity of this approach. In order to provide a concrete answer I will begin by scrutinizing how the erosion of the Communist ideology acted as a systemic flaw where the Soviet Union's legitimacy was put into question. I will then analyse how a non-reformist tendency was created in society and also acted as an

ontological flaw that would play a part in the fall. From there I will explore how ontological defects plagued the economic sector in the industrial and agricultural areas, leading the country to the brink of economic collapse. Finally I will analyse the independence movements, as certain scholars, especially Remnick and Kotkin, argue that these movements pushed towards ontological dissolution. It is imperative to recall that this chapter will analyse symptoms of the collapse that are of an ontological nature, namely long-term issues that manifested themselves in a negative manner on the longevity of the Soviet Union. As a result it is vital to bear in mind that the ontological factors to be analysed are usually seen as having all progressively converged together over the decades, provoking the cataclysmic collapse.

*The Untimely Death of an Ideology*

Since its early days, the Soviet Union was a political-economic experiment built to prove that the Communist-Socialist ideology could rival and even overtake Capitalism. It promoted itself as a superior model, and thus was condemned to surpassing capitalism if it did not want to lose its legitimacy. However, during Stalin's tenure, the ideological legitimacy of the Soviet Union crumbled due to two reasons: the first one being the aforementioned premier's rule and the other being Capitalism's success, which both ultimately played a part in its demise.

The early leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) such as Lenin, Trotsky, Kamenev, Bukharin, Zinoviev and Stalin all had different views regarding how to attain socio-economic prosperity, but Stalin would silence these after the 1921 to 1924 power struggle. Following this period, which saw the death of Lenin, Stalin emerged as the supreme leader of the Soviet Union. With the exile of Trotsky, and isolation of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Bukharin from the party, no effective opposition was left to obstruct the arrival of Stalin's fledging dictatorship. Subsequently, Stalin was able to go about effectively appropriating the Communist ideology for himself; with his personality cult he became the sole curator of what was Communist or reactionary (anti-Communist). Subsequently, to protect his hold on power, he turned the Soviet Union away from Marxist Communist internationalism by introducing his doctrine of 'Socialism in One Country', after Lenin's death in 1924.

"Insisting that Soviet Russia could […] begin the building of socialism […] by its own efforts. […] [Thus treading on] Marx's view that socialism was an international socialist movement or nothing."[12]

As a result, the USSR under Stalin alienated the possibilities of ideological renewal with other Communist states and even went as far as to claim, "that the interests of the Soviet Union were the interests of socialism."[13] Sakwa sees these actions as ones that locked the Soviet Union into a Stalinist mind-set early on and thus built the wrong ideological mechanisms that halted the advent of Communist ideology according to Marx. As a result, it is fair to acknowledge that when looking at ontological reasons for collapse, one of them can be mentioned as the Soviet Union being built upon an ambiguous ideological platform wherein it espoused elements of Communism but was severely tainted and handicapped by Stalinist rhetoric.

In addition to the debilitating effects Stalin's political manipulations had on the ideological foundations of the USSR, capitalism's successful reform dealt a supplementary blow to Soviet ideological credibility.

"Instead of a final economic crisis anticipated by Stalin and others, Capitalism experienced an unprecedented boom […] all leading capitalist countries embraced the welfare state […] stabilising their social orders and challenging Socialism on its own turf."[14]

Adding to the changing nature of capitalism was the onset of de-colonisation during the 1960s, taking away more legitimacy with every new independence agreement. By the end of the 1960s, the metamorphosis of capitalism had very much undermined the Soviet Union's ideological raison d'être, as "the differences between capitalism in the Great Depression [which the USSR had moulded itself against,] and capitalism in the post-war world were nothing short of earth shattering."[15] Here the ontological approach generally elaborates that Capitalism and incoherent ideological foundations brought about the disproving of the very political foundations the Soviet state rested upon and thus any social unrest leading to the collapse during Gorbachev's rule can be interpreted as logical by-products of the previous point. From this, it is possible to better understand how the crumbling of the legitimacy of the Communist

ideology was a fundamental ontological factor behind the collapse of the USSR. Building on this, I will now look into how the establishment of society during Stalin's rule also played a role in the collapse due to the shaping of a non-reforming society.

*The Foundations of a Non-Reforming Society*

One defect that would remain etched in the Soviet political-economic mind-set was the ontological tendency for non-reform. This trait would plague the very infrastructure of the Soviet Union until its dying days. The emergence of such a debilitating characteristic appeared during the very inception of the Soviet Union with the Kronstadt Sailors' Uprising. This uprising occurred during the Tenth Party Congress in 1921 and would have severe repercussion for the Soviet Union's future as Congress "delegates […] accepted a resolution that outlawed factions within the Party."[16] Thus, by stifling critical thinking and opposing views, this would effectively cancel out a major source of reform and act as an ontological shortcoming for future Soviet political-economic progress. This non-reformist trait was reinforced during Stalin's rule with the constant pressure the Communist Party exerted on agricultural and industrial planners. Here, "the party demanded not careful planning […] but enthusiasm; the leaders considered it treason when economists pointed out irrationalities in their plans."[17] Subsequently, planners were forced into a habit of drawing up unmanageable targets, which were within the party's political dictate. This meant, "central planners established planning targets that could only be achieved at enormous human cost and sacrifice. […] [and lacked] effective feedback mechanism"[18], which would provide insight to the flaws that existed in their plans. In the short-run this would only hinder the economy, but in the long-term it would lock the Soviet Union in a tangent where it could not reform itself in accordance to existent problems[19], thus leading it to a practically technologically obsolete state with a backwards economy by the time it collapsed.

Nevertheless, repression of critical thinking did not limit itself to the economic realm; it also occurred in the social sector where calls for the reform of the Socialist ideology were mercilessly crushed in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. It is possible to see a link here with the previous section of this chapter with regards to Stalin's hijacking of the Communist ideology. In the two social movements cited, both pushed towards a shift away from Stalinist rhetoric towards an actual adoption of Marxist Socialism. In Czechoslovakia this social push came under the name of 'Socialism with a Human Face' and wanted to "permit the dynamic development of socialist social relations, combine broad democracy with a scientific, highly qualified management, [and] strengthen the social order."[20] Although these were only Soviet satellite states, the fact that they were repressed showed that by the 1960s, the Soviet Union's non-reforming characteristic had consolidated itself to the point that any divergence from the official party line in the economic or social sectors was seen as high treason. This leads us to the ambiguous area of Soviet polity and how it jeopardised the existence of the USSR when merged with ontological non-reform.

'Polity' is the term I use here because it remains implausibly unclear as to who essentially governed the USSR during its sixty-nine years of existence. It seems that both the CPSU and the Soviet government occupied the same position of authority, thus creating

"a permanent crisis of governance. [Wherein] the party itself was never designed as an instrument of government and the formulation that 'the party rules but the government governs' allowed endless overlapping jurisdictions."[21]

Adding to the confusion was the CPSU's role in society, defined by Article Six of the USSR's 1977 Constitution: "The leading and guiding force of the Soviet society and the nucleus of its political system, of all state organisations and public organisations, is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union."[22] From here a profound ambiguity is seen surrounding the role of politics in the social realm. Accordingly, these two traits would create a profound ontological factor for collapse when merged with the non-reforming tendency of society. Due to the fact that when a more efficient leadership mechanism was sought out, it was impossible to identify how and what elements of the polity had to be changed.

It is here that an inter-linkage of approaches can be identified as the polity's ontological inability to reform according to Gorbachev's decisional re-shaping of society contributed to the demise of the USSR.

"The one-party regime ultimately fell owing to its inability to respond to immense social changes that had taken place in Soviet society- ironically, social changes that the Party itself had set in motion."[23]

Because Soviet polity was ontologically ill defined, when time came to reform it, the notion of what was to be changed obstructed the reform process. From this analysis, it is possible to see how ontological weaknesses in the over-lapping areas of politics and the social sector seriously hindered the Soviet Union. In the following section I will explore how ontological defects were of similar importance in the economic realm and were also interwoven with previously explained shortcomings.

*An Economy in Perpetual Crisis*

When looking at the economic realm there are a number of weaknesses that took root from the early days of the Soviet Union, the first aspect of scrutiny will be the ontological failure of economic centralisation and its contribution to the fall. In both the agricultural and industrial sectors, the USSR was unable to progress towards economic prosperity due to its flawed centralised economy. Agriculturally, centralisation meant that peasants were compelled to fulfil farming quotas set by the ministry in Moscow on land that solely belonged to the state. Consequently this generated two problems, the first one being a lack of incentive from the farmers and secondly, the inability of central authorities to cope with the myriad of different orders that had to be issued.

"Central planners in Moscow seldom know in advance what needs to be done in the different regions of the country. Because of this […] sometimes as much as 40 to 50 per cent of some crops rot in the field or in the distribution process."[24]

Worsening this was the party's non-reforming tendency, which meant that the "Soviet Union protected its misconceived collective and state farming network and made up for its agricultural ineptness by importing up to 20 per cent of the grain it needed."[25] This patching-up of ontological agricultural problems would result in an unpredictable and inconsistent agricultural sector as the decades passed, thus rendering it unreliable. This can be seen in the post-war agricultural growth rates that continuously fluctuated from 13.8 per cent in 1955 to -1.5 per cent in 1959 and finally -12.8 per cent in 1963![26] Such a "notoriously unpredictable agricultural sector […] consistently failed to meet planned targets"[27] and would remain an unresolved problem until the fall of the regime.

As for the industrial sector, the situation was difficult; with the disappearance of a demand and supply mechanism, the central authorities were unable to properly satisfy the material demands of society. Moreover, because of centralisation, most factories were the sole manufacturers of certain products in the whole of the USSR, meaning that an enormous amount of time and money was wasted in transport-logistics costs. Without the demand and supply mechanism, the whole economy had to be planned by central authorities, which proved to be excruciatingly difficult.

"Prices of inputs and outputs, the sources of supply, and markets for sale were strictly stipulated by the central ministries. […] [and] detailed regulation of factory level activities by remote ministries […] led to a dangerously narrow view of priorities at factory level."[28]

Consequently, central ministries frequently misallocated resources and factories took advantage of this by hoarding larger quantities of raw materials than they needed. Although the ontological failure of centralisation did not have as immediate effects as certain short-term conjunctural or decisional factors, its contribution to the fall can be seen in how, combined with the economic shortcomings to be highlighted hereon, it gradually deteriorated the economy of the country.

In addition to the failure of centralisation was the failure of agricultural collectivization, which would have an even greater negative effect on the Soviet Union. When looking at collectivization we can see how its affects were multi-layered, as it was a politically motivated campaign that would socially harm society and destroy the economy. Agriculturally, Stalin hindered the Soviet farming complex from its very beginnings by forcing collectivisation on farmers and publicly antagonising those who resisted as anti-revolutionary 'kulaks'. After the winter of 1929, Stalin defined the meaning of kulak as anyone refusing to enter collectives. Kulaks were subsequently persecuted and sent

to Siberian gulags, “the attack on the kulaks was an essential element in coercing the peasants to give up their farms.”[29] These repeated attacks came from a Bolshevik perception that peasants “were regarded with suspicion as prone to ‘petty-bourgeois’ individualist leanings.”[30] Due to these traumatic acts of violence, the peasantry was entirely driven into collectivisation by 1937; however, this only bolstered peasant hatred of the government and can be seen as the basis for the agricultural problem of rural depopulation that gradually encroached the country-side. By the 1980s,

“The legacy of collectivization was everywhere in the Soviet Union. In the Vologda region alone, there were more than seven thousand ‘ruined villages’ […] For decades, the young had been abandoning the wasted villages in droves.”[31]

This agricultural depopulation can be seen in how the number of collective farms gradually shrank from 235,500 in 1940 to merely 25,900 in 1981[32]; causing severe labour scarcity concerns to the agricultural sector.

Industrially, collectivisation was not widespread, although in the few cases it appeared, it brought about much suffering to yield positive results. The mining city of Magnitogorsk is a prime example where Stalinist planners

“built an autonomous company town […] that pushed away every cultural, economic, and political development in the civilized world [and where] 90 per cent of the children […] suffered from pollution-related illnesses.”[33]

While the West followed the spectacular expansion of Soviet industry from 1920 to 1975, this was at the cost of immense social sacrifice in the industrial and agricultural sectors, which were entirely geared towards aiding the industrial complex. In addition to this, much of Soviet industrial growth after Khrushchev’s rule was fuelled by oil profits emanating from Siberia, peaking from 1973 to 1985 when “energy exports accounted for 80% of the USSR’s expanding hard currency earnings.”[34]

Overall, ontological non-reform inter-linked with the failure of collectivisation and a deficient command structure would gradually weaken the economy to the brink of collapse in the 1980s. This elaboration was made clear in the 1983 Novosibirsk Report, which

“argued that the system of management created for the old-style command economy of fifty years ago remained in operation in very different circumstances. It now held back the further development of the country’s economy.”[35]

Nevertheless, ontological problems behind the fall did not only restrict themselves to the economic, political or social realms but also existed regarding the ‘nationalities question.’

*A Defective Union*

When looking at the fifteen different republics that comprised the USSR, one may ask how it was possible to unite such diverse nationalities together without the emergence of complications. The truth behind this is that many problems arose from this union even though the CPSU maintained, until the very end, the conviction that all republics and people were acquiescent of it. Gorbachev’s statement in 1987 that

“‘the nationalities issue has been resolved for our country’ […] reflected the party’s most suicidal illusion, that it had truly created […] a multinational state in which dozens of nationalisms had been dissolved.”[36]

Today certain scholars see the independence movements of the early 1990s as a result of the ontological malformation of the Soviet Union’s identity. The most common argument expounds that the independence movements fuelling dissolution occurred due to two ontological reasons. The first one can be seen as a consequence of Stalin’s rule and “as part of his policy of divide and rule, where the borders between ethno-federal units were often demarcated precisely to cause maximum aggravation between peoples.”[37] This contributed to the Soviet Union’s inability to construct a worthwhile federal polity and an actual Soviet nation-state. In addition to this was the ontological exploitation of central Soviet republics and prioritisation of the Russian state. This created long-term

republican discontent that laid the foundations of independence movements: “Everything that went wrong with the Soviet system over the decades was magnified in Central Asia,”[38] “Moscow had turned all of Central Asia into a vast cotton plantation […] destroying the Aral Sea and nearly every other area of the economy.”[39]

Overall, it is possible to argue that the collapse occurred due to inherent flaws in the foundations of the Soviet Union. Ontological factors behind the collapse were an admixture of socio-political and economic weaknesses that gradually wore at the foundations of the USSR. The first area analysed was the demise of the Marxist ideology that up-held the legitimacy of the Soviet Union. I then scrutinized the non-reforming tendency that settled in Soviet society very early on. Such an area eventually brought me to inspect the ontological flaws in Soviet economy, which had close links with the previous section. Finally, I examined inherent flaws in the USSR’s union and how these also played a role in the demise. While the ontological factors represent a substantial part of the explanation to the downfall, decisional and conjunctural factors must also be examined to fully grasp the collapse.

**Chapter Two: Was the Collapse of the USSR Decisional in Nature?**

Whilst long-term flaws in the foundations of the Soviet Union played a major role in its demise, it is important to acknowledge that most of Gorbachev’s reforms also had drastic effects on the survival of the union. From hereon, I will explore how the decisional approach explains vital short-term factors behind the collapse and cannot be forgone when pondering this dissertation’s thesis-question. To begin with, I will analyse the failure of Gorbachev’s two major economic initiatives known as Uskoreniye (acceleration of economic reforms) and Perestroika. This will then inevitably lead me to the scrutiny of his socio-political reforms under Glasnost and how imprudent decisions in this sector led to widespread unrest in the USSR. Finally I will look into how Gorbachev’s decisional errors led to most republics to opt out of the Soviet Union. But before I start it is important to understand that although I will be separating the economic reforms (Uskoreniye and Perestroika), from socio-political ones (Glasnost), these were very much intertwined as Gorbachev saw them as mutually complementary.

*A Botched Uskoreniye and an Ineffective Perestroika*

By the time Gorbachev rose to power in March 1985, ontologically economic problems had ballooned to disproportionate levels. His initial approach to change was different to his predecessor; he took advice from field-experts and immediately set into motion economic Uskoreniye (acceleration). At this point, economic reform was indispensible as the collective agricultural sector lay in ruins with a lethargic 1.1 per cent output growth between 1981 and 1985, whilst industrial output growth fell from 8.5 per cent in 1966 to 3.7 per cent 1985.[40] Although Gorbachev could not permit himself mistakes, it is with Uskoreniye that the first decisional errors regarding the economy were committed and cost him much of his credibility. Under Abel Aganbegyan’s advisory, Gorbachev diverted Soviet funds to retool and refurbish the machinery industry, which was believed would accelerate scientific and technological progress. He supplemented this effort by reinforcing the centralisation of Soviet economy by creating super-ministries, that way “planners could eliminate intermediate bureaucracies and concentrate on overall strategic planning.”[41] Whereas these reforms did have some positive impacts, they were not far reaching enough to bring profound positive change to Soviet industrial production. Moreover, in the agricultural sector, Gorbachev initiated a crackdown on owners of private property in 1986, which led farmers to fear the government, and would disturb the success of future agricultural reforms. His error with Uskoreniye lay in the fact that he had “aroused the population with his call for a complete overhaul of Soviet society, but in the economic realm at least, complete overhaul turned out for most part to be not much more than a minor lubrication job.”[42] Realising his mistake, Gorbachev acquired the belief it was the economic system he had to change, and set out to do just that with his move towards Perestroika (Restructuring).

“Gorbachev had at first tried simply to use the old machinery of government to reform. […] the main reason why this failed was that the old machinery […] were a very large part of the problem.”[43]

Although the term ‘Perestroika’ did exist prior to Gorbachev’s tenure in office, it was he who remoulded it into a reform process that would attempt to totally restructure the archaic economic system. “Unlike the first batch of economic reforms […] the second set seemed to reflect a turning away from the Stalinist economic system,”[44] a

move that startled the agricultural sector which had been subjected to repression the prior year. In 1987, Gorbachev legalised individual farming and the leasing of state land to farmers in an effort to enhance agronomic production. However, this reform was flawed due to the half-hearted nature of the endeavour, wherein farmers were allowed to buy land but it would remain state-owned. Therefore, due to Gorbachev's reluctance to fully privatise land, "many prospective free farmers could see little point in developing farms that the state could snatch back at any time."[45] Adding to this social setback was the purely economic problem, since

"without a large number of participants the private […] movements could never attain credibility. A large number of new sellers would produce a competitive environment that could hold prices down."[46]

Thus, due to Gorbachev's contradictory swift changes from agricultural repression to reluctant land leasing, his second agrarian reform failed.

Industrially, Gorbachev went even further in decisional miscalculations, without reverting his earlier move towards ultra-centralisation of the super-ministries, he embarked on a paradoxical semi-privatisation of markets. Gorbachev's 1987 Enterprise Law illustrates this as he attempted to "transfer decision-making power from the centre to the enterprises themselves"[47] through the election of factory managers by workers who would then decide what to produce and work autonomously. Adding to this, the 1988 Law on Cooperatives that "legalized a wide range of small businesses"[48] supplemented this move towards de-centralisation. Combined, it was anticipated that these reforms

"would have introduced more motivation and market responsiveness […] in practice, it did nothing of the sort […] workers not surprisingly elected managers who offered an easy life and large bonuses."[49]

Moreover, the Enterprise Law "contributed to the magnitude of the macro and monetary problems. […] [as] managers invariably opted to increase the share of expensive goods they produced,"[50] which led to shortages of cheaper goods. Whilst, the law had reverse effects on workers, the blame lies with Gorbachev as no effort was put into the creation of a viable market infrastructure.

"Without private banks from which to acquire investment capital, without a free market, […] without profit motive and the threat of closure or sacking, managers rarely had the incentive […] to change their ways."[51]

By going halfway in his efforts to create a market-oriented economy, Gorbachev destroyed his possibilities of success. "The existing 'command-administrative' economic system was weakened enough to be even less efficient, but not enough that market economics could begin to operate,"[52] in effect, he had placed the economy in a nonsensical twilight zone. Consequently, the economy was plunged into a supply-side depression by 1991 since "the availability of private and cooperative shops, which could charge higher prices, served to suck goods out of the state shops, which in turn caused labor unrest"[53] and steady inflation. Here, Gorbachev began to feel the negative effects of his reforms, as mass disillusionment in his capability to lead the economy towards a superior model coupled with his emphasis on the abolition of repression and greater social freedom (Glasnost) tipped the USSR into a state of profound crisis.

*The Success of Glasnost*

Having understood Gorbachev's economical decisional errors with Perestroika, I will now set out to demonstrate how his simultaneous introduction of Glasnost in the social sector proved to be a fatal blow for the Soviet Union. Originally, Gorbachev set out to promote democratisation in 1987 as a complementary reform that would aid his economic ones, he "saw Glasnost as a way to create nation of whistle-blowers who would work with him"[54] against corruption. To the surprise of Soviet population, Gorbachev even encouraged socio-economic debates and allowed the formation of *Neformaly*, which were "leisure organizations [and] up to a quarter were either lobby groups or were involved in issues […] which gave them an implicitly political function."[55] Gorbachev initiated this move at a time when the USSR was still searching for the correct reform process. Thus, the *Neformaly* movement was a way for him to strengthen the reform process without weakening the party by including the involvement of the public. But as Perestroika led to continuous setbacks, Gorbachev began to opt for more drastic measures with Glasnost, upholding

his belief that the key lay in further democratisation. In November 1987, on the 70th anniversary of the October revolution, Gorbachev gave a speech purporting to Stalin's crimes, which was followed by the resurgence of freedom of speech and gradual withdrawal of repression. "Intellectually, politically and morally the speech would play a critical role in undermining the Stalinist system of coercion and empire."[56] At Gorbachev's behest, censorship was decreased and citizens could finally obtain truthful accounts regarding Soviet history and the outside world. However, this reform proved to be fairly detrimental as "Soviet citizens were dismayed to find that their country actually lagged far behind the 'civilized' countries. They were also taken aback by the flood of revelations about Soviet history."[57] While this did not trigger outbursts of unrest in amongst the population, "it did have the cumulative impact of delegitimizing the Soviet regime in eyes of many Russians."[58] After his speech, Gorbachev continued his frenetic march towards democratisation with the astounding creation of a Congress of People's Deputies in 1989. Yet again, Gorbachev had found that the reform process necessitated CPSU support, however, conservatives at the heart of the party were continuously moving at cross-purpose to his reform efforts. Hence, by giving power to the people to elect deputies who would draft legislation, Gorbachev believed that he would be "strengthening the government, [and] by creating this new Congress, he could gradually diminish the role of the Party regulars [conservatives]."[59]

Instead of strengthening the government, Gorbachev's Glasnost of society pushed the USSR further along the path of social turmoil. In hindsight, it is possible to see that

"the democracy Gorbachev had in mind was narrow in scope. […] Criticism […] would be disciplined […] and would serve to help, not hurt the reform process. […] His problems began when […] disappointment with his reforms led […] critics to disregard his notion of discipline."[60]

As soon as economic Perestroika failed to yield its promises, the proletariat began to speak out en masse, and instead of constructive openness, Gorbachev had created a Glasnost of criticism and disillusion. This was seen following the 1989 Congress, as social upheavals erupted when miners "saw the politicians complain openly about grievances never aired before" [61] and decided to do the same. "In 1989, almost half the country's coal miners struck,"[62] followed by other episodes in 1991 when "over 300,000 miners had gone out on strike."[63] Very quickly, Gorbachev also came to sourly regret his *Neformaly* initiative as workers, peasants, managers and even the military organized themselves in lobby groups, some of them asking the Kremlin to press forth with reforms and others asking to revert the whole reform process. Gorbachev's decisional error lay in his simultaneous initiation of Perestroika and Glasnost; as the latter met quick success whilst the economy remained in free-fall, society was plunged into a state of profound crisis.

*Party Politics*

Alongside his catastrophic reform of society and the economy, Gorbachev launched a restructuring of the CPSU, which he deemed essential to complement his economic reforms. In 1985, Gorbachev purged (discharged) elements of the CPSU *nomenklatura*, a term designating the key administrative government and party leaders.

"Within a year, more than 20 to 30 % of the ranks of the Central Committee […] had been purged. Gorbachev expected that these purges would rouse the remaining members of the nomenklatura to support perestroika."[64]

This attack on the party served as an ultimatum to higher government and party officials who were less inclined on following Gorbachev's path of reform. Nevertheless, as economic and social turmoil ensued, Gorbachev went too far in his denunciation of the party, angering party members and causing amplified disillusionment within the proletariat. Examples of this are rife: "behind the closed doors of the January 1987 Plenum of the Central Committee, Gorbachev […] accused the Party of resisting reform."[65] In 1988, "Gorbachev also fashioned himself a scapegoat for economic failures: the Ligachev-led conservatives were strangling the reforms."[66] Up until 1988, this attack on the party nomenklatura did not have far-reaching repercussions, but as Gorbachev nurtured and strengthened the reformist faction of the CPSU, infighting between the conservatives and reformist began having two negative effects. The first one was widespread public loss of support for the party; this can be seen in the drop in Communist Party membership applications and rise in resignations. "By 1988 the rate of membership growth had fallen to a minuscule 0.1 per cent, and then in 1989 membership actually fell, for the first time since 1954."[67] The other negative

repercussion lay in how party infighting led to the inability of the CPSU to draft sensible legislation. This was due to Gorbachev continuously altering the faction he supported in order to prevent one from seizing power. Such a characteristic can be spotted in his legislative actions regarding the economy and social sector, which mirrored his incessant political shifts from the reformist faction to the conservative one. In 1990, Gorbachev opted for more de-centralisation and even greater autonomy in Soviet republics by creating the Presidential Council where heads of each republic were able to have a say in his decisions. However, he reversed course in 1991 with the creation of the Security Council where heads of republics now had to report to him directly, thus reasserting party control. Concerning the economy, Gorbachev acted similarly: as earlier explained, his first batch of reforms in 1986 stressed the need for centralisation with super-ministries, but he changed his mind the year after with his Cooperatives and Enterprise Laws and agricultural reforms. Gorbachev constantly

"switched course […] [his] indecisiveness on the economy and the Soviet political system has generated more confusion than meaningful action. […] After a time, no one seemed to be complying with orders from the centre."[68]

In effect, it is possible to see here an overlapping of approaches since the way party infighting affected Gorbachev's reforms can be seen as a contingent factor that obstructed reform or a decisional error on Gorbachev's behalf for having reformed the party in such a manner.

Overall, this incoherence in his reform process can be seen as the result of his own decisional mistakes. Having succeeded in his Glasnost of society and the party, Gorbachev had allowed high expectation to flourish regarding his economic reforms, expectations that were gradually deceived. Amidst this social turmoil, economic downturn, party infighting and widespread disillusionment, Soviet republics began to move towards independence as the central command of the Kremlin progressively lost control and became evermore incoherent in its reforms.

*The Death of the Union*

As the Soviet Union descended into a state of socio-economic chaos, individual republics began to voice their plea to leave the union. This can be seen as having been triggered by the combination of three decisional errors on Gorbachev's behalf. The first one was his miscalculation of the outcome of Glasnost, as by 1990

"all 15 republics began to issue calls for either economic sovereignty or political independence. […] Gorbachev's efforts to induce local groups to take initiative on their own were being implemented, but not always in the way he had anticipated."[69]

Originally, initiative had never been thought of as a topic that could lead to independence movements, instead Gorbachev had introduced this drive to stimulate workers and managers to find solutions that were akin to the problems felt in their factory or region. Adding to this mistake were Gorbachev's failed economic reforms with Perestroika, and as the Union's economic state degenerated, individual republics began to feel that independence was the key to their salvation. Gorbachev's

"leadership could not arrest, […] falling output and living standards and pursued macro-economic policies that carried significant consequences for the republics. These factors taken together provided a strong economic rationale for separatist republican leaderships."[70]

The final point lay in how Gorbachev had made autonomy and decentralisation a clear goal in his economic reforms; consequently, this triggered a

"rise in regional power […] [as] local leaders felt compelled to meet local needs first, saving payments to the central budget for last, […] republics withheld funds […] [and] contributed to the economic crisis."[71]

From this analysis, it is now possible to better understand how Gorbachev's decisional errors prompted the independence movements that led to the fall of the Soviet Union.

In conclusion, it is possible to realise that the collapse of the Soviet Union was also triggered by vital decisional errors committed by Gorbachev. The first series of mistakes I analysed was his attempt to implement two contradictory sets of economic reforms within a few months of each other (Uskoreniye and Perestroika). Following an analysis of Perestroika's weaknesses, I then went on to examine how the simultaneous introduction of Glasnost and Perestroika proved a fatal decision. Prior to Gorbachev, Soviet society was relatively stable thanks to

"two factors: the use or threat of repression; and the modest but steady improvement of living standards […] both of these elements were severely disrupted by Gorbachev's policies, which brought a fundamental easing of repression and a sharp deterioration of economic performance."[72]

Succeeding my socio-economic analysis was a survey of the political realm and decipherment of what errors Gorbachev committed in his leadership of the Party. The final section then analysed how Gorbachev's failed socio-economic and political choices contributed in triggering independence movements in most republics. That being said, the decisional and ontological approaches only provide partial accounts of the fall, which can only be completed through the analysis of the conjunctural approach.

**Chapter Three: Was the Collapse of the USSR Conjunctural in Nature?**

Unlike the previous two approaches, the conjunctural one mainly focuses on political contingent factors that hindered Gorbachev's reform process. Scholars who analyse the dissolution through a conjunctural light, such as Steele or Dunlop, generally focus on a short-term timeframe beginning with Gorbachev's arrival to power. In order to better understand the contingent factors that thwarted Gorbachev's efforts I will first investigate the origins and characteristics of the conservatives of the CPSU and how they consistently acted as a conjunctural obstacle to reform. Here, I will be drawing from a variety of scholars, namely Remnick, Goldman and Kelley, all whom will be providing comprehensive and impartial insight. Leading on, I will then shift focus onto Gorbachev's political reforms from 1985 onwards where Steele and Galeotti will help demonstrate that Gorbachev was locked in a constant political struggle with various movements when trying to push his reforms forwards. I will then end with an analysis of how both the Communist party conservatives and Yeltsin's reformist movement conspired against Gorbachev during the August 1991 coup, eventually proving that the final blow to the USSR was indeed conjunctural in nature.

*The Conservative Hurdle*

Although the term 'conservative faction' of the CPSU can be perceived as an elusive concept, I will be using it here when referring to those in the party leadership who did not wish to allow the arrival of reforms. Such conservatives were frequently associated with corruption and elitism as they customarily fought for the protection of luxuries they had acquired by accessing the higher echelons of party hierarchy. Remnick goes so far as implying that "it was as if the entire Soviet Union were ruled by a gigantic mob family; virtually all economic relations were, in some form, mafia relations."[73] The origins of such an unofficial pressure group can be seen during the beginnings of Brezhnev's rule when he attempted to implement a reform of the party "by adopting modern managerial techniques [but] the old guard held firm against such reforms."[74] This type of conservatism eventually spilled over from the higher echelons into the Communist party apparatus (*Apparatchiki or Nomenklatura)* and strengthened the ontological non-reformist tendencies that had settled in. Up until Gorbachev's rule the conservative elements of the CPSU went unopposed since Brezhnev perpetuated the existing order, "as Solzhenitsyn wrote in 1991, the corrupt ruling class […] is not capable of voluntarily renouncing any of the privileges they have seized."[75] Upon this, it is no surprise that these same conservatives opposed the reforms Gorbachev wanted to apply, "because to implement the reform he had to rely upon the very people he wanted to get rid of. In effect he was asking them to destroy themselves as a class."[76] As I will explain, Gorbachev's actions from the very beginning of his political reforms in 1987 were constantly geared towards out-manoeuvring this political elite. Ill-advisedly, in attempting to rid himself of such a contingent obstacle, he initiated movements that gained such momentum that they too would become political contingent factors in the collapse.

*One Contingent Problem Leads to Another*

Upon attaining power, Gorbachev and two of his close reformist allies (Yakovlev and Shevardnadze) on the Central Committee "were flying […] against a terrific conservative headwind [who] thought only that something needed to be changed. […] A little bit, but always relying on the Party apparatus."[77]

Gorbachev soon realised this reluctance to reform and in 1987 "admitted that he faced 'a certain intensification of resistance by conservative forces', although 'naturally these people never say that they oppose *Perestroika* [only] its negative side-effects.'"[78] Such conjunctural opposition to his leadership shaped his actions during the 19th Party Conference in 1988 when he set out to perform a crucial set of reforms that would attempt to change the structure of the party. His goal was to bypass the blockade conservatives imposed on his reforms by outsmarting the higher party cadres in the Politburo and relying on the CPSU's nineteen million members to elect a new central committee. He initially "assumed that the party's […] members were more progressive […] than the professional apparatus."[79] Cunningly, the party apparatus

"took advantage of the rules for electing delegates which the old central committee had laid down a year before […] [wherein delegates] passed up for approval to a series of party committees before being voted on at regional and republican level. This made it easy for the apparatus to reject radicals."[80]

Frustrated by incessant obstructions, Gorbachev decided that he had no choice but to reduce the party's powerbase by bringing about the creation of the Congress of People's Deputies. From here, it is possible to see how Gorbachev's decision to go even further towards political openness was greatly swayed by the contingent obstacle set by conservatives in regards to reform. His subsequent attempt to rid himself and the Soviet Union of one conjunctural problem only led to the creation of another.

Following the launch of the Congress of People's Deputies, Gorbachev's vision of the arrival of a more reformist-oriented faction in the CPSU took form. Such a group enabled Gorbachev to obtain further support for his reforms during the early days but this advantage rapidly faded away. With the failure of Perestroika and the success of Glasnost, the conservatives led by Ligachev and the reformists led by Yeltsin began to exert pressure on Gorbachev who realised that both factions actually began to act as separate contingent obstacles to his reforms. On one side Yeltsin "criticised it [Perestroika] for not improving people's standard of living […] [and on the other] Ligachev suggested it was a dangerously open-ended policy."[81] Thus, by 1988 Gorbachev had been pushed into a tense situation where the reformists and the conservatives both acted as pressure groups to his reforms. Although the reformists did not obstruct his efforts, they called for rapid openings in Perestroika and for a complete market economy. Due to this "the more open threat came from radicals who felt Gorbachev was not going far enough"[82], whilst conservatives thought he was going too far.

*The 1989 Radicalisation*

By 1989, the reformist faction of the CPSU truly began to plague Gorbachev's reform process, as this faction failed to provide a unified source of advice and support. Originally, Gorbachev had hoped that the reformists would back him in his decision and maybe provide useful guidance; instead they became divided into two groupuscules. On one side,

"A minority of people wanted to remove the Communist party from power altogether. […] [and on the other] a second group wanted to reform the party so that is could compete in elections with some chance of success."[83]

Even worse for Gorbachev was the emergence of Yeltsin of Democratic Russia, which encapsulated most reformist political entities of the time under his leadership. As a very able politician, Yeltsin was able to galvanise the masses by building his power on the disillusion that was widely felt during the failure of Perestroika. It was in February 1990 that Gorbachev's felt the full affect of his decision to democratise the party and society in hopes of disarming the conservatives as the reformists turned against him. Yeltsin effectively became the second conjunctural problem as he united "around a quarter million people [and] marched […] towards the Kremlin for a rally […] Yeltsin barked that this would be Gorbachev's 'last chance'" [84] to install a Soviet multi-party state. And "on February 7, 1990, the Central Committee passed a platform that effectively opened the way for a multi-party system. They really had no choice."[85] Upon this, it is possible to see how the reformists under Yeltsin were able to exploit the weakened

conservative faction and replace them as a new contingent problem. Unlike the conservatives, the reformist wing was able to unite the masses and force through certain decisions. This characteristic was worsened after May 1990 when Yeltsin was voted in as Chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet; a position of similar rank to Gorbachev's Presidency of the Soviet Union and that further limited his powers.

From 1990 onwards Gorbachev found himself in the middle of two contingent obstacles that obstructed and undermined his efforts. His incoherence in decisions regarding Perestroika and Glasnost may be seen as a by-product of these exact contingent factors that made his position untenable. A relevant example can be seen during summer 1990 when Yeltsin and Gorbachev drew out a 500-day plan for the economy with very capitalistic tendencies to it. However, after pressure from the conservatives who "made it quite clear that they would not tolerate a radical reordering of political and economic power, Gorbachev withdrew his support for the 500 Days plan."[86] As a consequence from such pressures exerted by both political wings, Gorbachev found himself attempting to satisfy both parties but to no avail. In March 1991, after widespread chaos in the Soviet Union with the notable Bloody Sunday in Lithuania, Gorbachev opted for a return to order and sided with conservatives as he "found himself unable to master the new form of politics he set free."[87] With the backing of Ligachev, Gorbachev installed a ban on demonstrations from March 26 to April 15 1991 while he prepared to oust Yeltsin from his seat as Supreme Soviet during a special session of the Congress of People's Deputies. This proved to be a severe political faux pas as Yeltsin immediately countered the ban on demonstration by organising a peaceful protest on March 28th. That day,

"a pivotal showdown took place between Yeltsin […] and his supporters, on the one hand, and Gorbachev […] on the other. […] The pro-Yeltsin forces [in congress] achieved a solid 532-286 vote defying Gorbachev."[88]

In addition to a significant political victory, Yeltsin also displayed a convincing tour de force with the estimated 150,000 to 500,000 prodemocracy demonstrators that flocked en mass in the streets of Moscow. By April 1991, Gorbachev had entirely lost control of the political, social and economic realms. The reformist faction and the conservatives had materialised into indomitable obstacles to Gorbachev's desired course of action; so much so that his time was not spent anymore pondering over what reforms to carry out but more so on how to deal with the two conjunctural obstacles that were in front of him.

*Yeltsin and The Coup: Two Mutual Conjunctural Factors of Collapse*

As 1991 progressed, Yeltsin and Democratic Russia steadily moved towards a political confrontation with the CPSU conservatives who advocated the return to repression. In this complicated political disarray, Gorbachev's decisions seemed to have no effect on the Soviet public partly due to Yeltsin's successful political manoeuvres. The antecedents of the conservative coup that ensued in August 1991 can be seen in Yeltsin's machinations.

In mid-1991, Yeltsin issued

"calls for the political and economic sovereignty of the Russian republic. [And] If implemented […] would leave almost no role for Gorbachev and the Soviet government over one half of the country. […] Eventually all 15 republics began to issue calls for either economic sovereignty or political independence"[89]

Well-aware of Yeltsin's power, Gorbachev reacted to this threat by making yet another political shift, this time lending support to Yeltsin and his Union Treaty in a bid to save the Soviet Union from disintegration. Here it is important to acknowledge how Yeltsin as a conjunctural obstacle, ingeniously forced Gorbachev's course of action. "On 29-30 July Gorbachev, Yeltsin and President Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan […] [agreed to the] signing of the Union Treaty […] [on the] 20th August."[90] Such a treaty advocated the advent of a 'Union of Soviet Sovereign Republic' wherein membership was voluntary and republican sovereignty would be allowed. More worryingly for the conservatives at the CPSU

"there would be no All-Union parliament, with the USSR Supreme Soviet being disbanded […] All-Union ministries would generally either be dissolved or turned into much smaller coordinating bodies, largely supporting republican ministries."[91]

Quite logically, such a treaty profoundly unsettled the conservatives of the party since it would signify the end of their rule as an elite segment of the Soviet society. Consequently, leading hard-liners of the CPSU began plotting a coup d'état that would bring back the heavy-handed rule of the party.

"On the evening of 17 August, a watershed meeting was held […] those present included Kryuchkov, Yazov, Pavlov [and] Baklov […] the participants agreed to move forward with the introduction of emergency rule."[92]

The coup lasted four days from August 18th to the 22nd, during which the plotters put Gorbachev under house arrest in his vacation home in Foros on the Crimea and deployed 50,000 soldiers in Moscow. In the end, the coup failed as Moscow ground to a standstill with thousands of supporters flocking to defend the White House, an emblem of democracy where Yeltsin had taken refuge. During these four days, Yeltsin emerged as the one and only democratic leader who heroically faced off the plotters in Moscow. Upon release "Gorbachev returned from Foros an ex-president;"[93] with the plotters having effectively tarnished the CPSU, Yeltsin seized his chance and "issued a decree on economic sovereignty of the Russian Federation […] two days later […] the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet declared Ukraine an independent state"[94] and all fifteen republics followed suite.

Overall, the August coup failed with much irony, as ultimately "the conspirators had launched the putsch to save the Soviet empire and their positions in it. Their failure was the finishing blow."[95] Although many factors pushing towards dissolution, it was the assembly of two contingent factors, both obstructing Gorbachev's reform process that brought the USSR to its knees. Yeltsin's Democratic Russia movement and the anti-reform conservatives proved to be two conjunctural thorns in Gorbachev's efforts until the very end, so much so that in the events of August 1991, Gorbachev had lost his status as actor in the political showdown that ensued. Although the conservatives were the primary contingent problem, their mere existence forced Gorbachev to search for support amongst the reformist faction of the CPSU. This eventually led to the rise of Yeltsin and his pro-democracy movement, who conspired against Gorbachev and through their actions, triggered such unrest amongst conservatives that these resorted to a coup d'état as their only solution. When acknowledging the conjunctural approach to the fall, it is possible to now state that the short-term reason for the collapse can also be ascribed to contingent factors that hindered Gorbachev's decision-making capabilities. In hindsight, it is now possible to see these two contingent factors as unquestionably having dealt the coup-de-grace to an already dissolving Soviet Union.

**Conclusion**

From my analysis, it is now possible to confirm the validity of my argument and that all three approaches are critical when attempting to explain the fall of the Soviet Union. The use of Sakwa's ontological, decisional and conjunctural approaches provides a multi-layered rationale to the different reasons the Soviet Union could not endure anymore. This was seen in the three analytical chapters wherein I pondered the necessity of each approach. The first chapter analysed the ontological approach, which examined how long-term socio-economic and political structural flaws played a role in the demise of the USSR. Here, I accentuated how the ideological legitimacy of the Soviet Union was lost early on and was linked to an ontological non-reforming tendency that settled in the socio-political and economic spheres. This then linked into my scrutiny of ontological faults in the Soviet economy and nationalities questions, areas that proved to have profound structural flaws.

This chapter was followed by an analysis of the decisional approach, wherein I weighed out short-term socio-economic and political decisions performed by Gorbachev and determined to what extent these equally contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union. Here, I especially focused on Gorbachev's mismanagement of Glasnost and key errors committed in Perestroika's inception. I also delved into the analysis of Gorbachev's contradictory economic policies, namely Uskoreniye and Perestroika. These two series of reforms went in totally different economic directions and were triggered within one year of each other!

The closing analytical chapter examined what conjunctural elements existed in the fall. This chapter provided crucial insight into how short-term contingent political factors hindered Gorbachev's chosen course of action and eventually administered the finishing blow to the Soviet Union. The analysis especially focused on the input of CPSU conservatives and pro-democracy movements in laying contingent obstacles in Gorbachev's chosen path of reforms.

Throughout this chapter I also demonstrated how leaders on both sides, specifically Ligachev and Yeltsin, greatly damaged Gorbachev's support base and openly campaigning against him.

As I have already expounded separately, these approaches only provide partial explanations to the fall, which means that it is only united that their strength exists. This said, there are still certain areas that have escaped my analysis and are to be noted, as these could be pertinent topics of further analysis in regards to the fall of the USSR.

The first one concerns Gorbachev's foreign policy and how his actions in the international realm affected the internal affairs of the Soviet Union, and possibly even played a part in its dissolution. The second domain that could have been intricately investigated was the dissident movement within the Soviet Union; a topic Sakwa has very much touched upon. Following my research, I have gathered that these dissident movements, known as the Samizdat, played a vital role in the demise of the Soviet Union after the advent of Glasnost. Finally, remaining on a more theoretical framework, it would have been interesting to investigate how the use of force (or rather lack of it when it came to Gorbachev), also contributed to the demise of the Soviet Union. Numerous scholars such as Schoenfeld, Dunlop and Remnick advocate that it was "by lifting the pall of repression and fear, [that] Gorbachev dried up the fuel that the old system ran on."[96]Alternatively, the analysis of these topics would necessitate separate theses to do them justice.

As of now, my scrutiny of the three main approaches to the demise of the Soviet Union should provide an extensive analytical explanation behind internal reasons for the fall.

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*Date written: 01/2013*