

# The Quiet Collapse of the Soviet Union

Written by Arthur Jeannerot

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The Cold War was the biggest arms race of the last centuries, and at the same a relatively peaceful period. According to Kenneth Waltz, “the longest peace yet known rested on two pillars: bipolarity and nuclear weapons” (Waltz 44). Shortly after the end of World War II, the Soviet Union reinforced its grasp on Eastern Europe and slowly built the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or USSR. On the opposite side, Western Europe benefitted from strong help from the United States who were determined to contain communism and have more power than the Soviet Union. Even though the two blocks were not fighting each other directly, they struggled for influence around the world and tried to get all countries to choose a side. The rise of these two superpowers with tremendous military arsenals trying to expand their reach went on for decades and, unexpectedly, did not evolve into a full-out nuclear World War III. Instead, the Soviet Union collapsed almost peacefully, and the thousands of nuclear missiles stockpiled by both powers were thankfully not put to use. Even though some Yugoslavian revolutions caused civil wars, the Cold War ended in the most abrupt and yet peaceful way. More importantly, what was then the second largest world power gave up its power willingly after more than seven decades, and “neither realists, liberals, institutionalists, nor peace researchers recognized beforehand the possibility of such momentous change” (Lebow and Risse-Kappen 1). It is the purpose of this paper to search for reasons that explain how the Soviet Union slowly fell apart, and disintegrated from the inside in a peaceful process.

After a brief historical summary of the Cold War and the critical context after 1985, several reasons for the USSR’s demise will be outlined. Because of the principle of mutually assured destruction, both the US and USSR knew that taking any serious action would cause a complete disaster for the entire world. Furthermore, the Soviet Union could not have struck because its arsenal was weaker than that of the Americans, which meant that it had no chance of surviving. Then, the disarmament treaties that followed the period of *détente* dealt a fatal blow to the Soviet Union, which saw its military power reduce drastically. In addition to this, the policies of *perestroika*, or restructuring, and *glasnost*, or openness, re-introduced by Gorbachev gave people a taste of freedom, and made them realize that the communist ideal was not actually possible. This made the revolutions in Eastern Europe easier because they were not severely reprimanded, which in turn made people realize that they could rise against the USSR and claim their freedom back. All these events led to a complete loss of credibility for the Soviet Union’s communist model and Gorbachev had no choice but to let the people accomplish their will – the Berlin Wall fall – and declare the end of the Cold War at the Malta Summit of 1989. During all these years, the USSR was getting armed to fight its biggest enemy, but finally the threat proved to come from the inside rather than the outside, an outcome that no one expected. Finally, we will see how the Crimean crisis is a good reminder that tension between the US and the largest ex-USSR state has never disappeared, and that both nations are still fundamentally different.

The Cold War started shortly after the end of World War II, as the world witnessed the exponential rise of two diametrically opposed leaders who were both trying to impose their views on the rest of the world. The US and their allies wanted to convert the rest of the world to capitalism, and the Soviet Union intended to do the same with communism. Throughout the decades, this permanent ideological conflict led the two leaders to use all the tools they had in order to spread their influence. The Cold War caused the rise of espionage, propaganda, and proxy wars such as the Korean War of 1950-1953 or the Afghanistan War of 1979-1989. The conflict also led to the construction of the Berlin Wall by East Germany, a result of the Berlin crisis of 1961 and of the massive brain drain East Germany suffered. The following year, the Cuban missile crisis was expected by many to be the trigger of a full-out nuclear war, because of the massive threat posed by Soviet nuclear warheads in Cuba. This rapid escalation and its peaceful

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resolve by the Soviet Union's withdrawal of the missiles was followed by a much more relaxed period known as *détente*, that lasted until the late 1970s. The conflict heated up again in what some historians call the "Second Cold War" (Cox 18). At this point, the Soviet-led invasion of Afghanistan caused increased tension, and the arms race reached its peak. Diplomatic relations between East and West were at their worst with the mutual boycotts of the 1980 and 1984 Moscow and Los Angeles Olympics, and this short six-year period between 1979 and 1985 was even the subject of a book by Frederick Halliday, published in 1983 titled *The Making of the Second Cold War*. The tensions started to ease in 1985 as Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power and showed his intentions to bring change to the USSR.

When Gorbachev took the reins of the USSR in 1985, he had the difficult task of putting back on its feet a state where "crisis symptoms were everywhere apparent" (Sakwa 410). The Soviet people felt abandoned by their leaders, and envied the Western lifestyle and the perks of living in a free-market economy. As opposed to his predecessors, Gorbachev was open to the idea that the USSR would eventually have to break away from the communist model in order to prosper, which led to the reshaping of the previously introduced policies of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness). Gorbachev was also determined to reduce the tremendous spending on military armament, another trait that differentiated him from his predecessors. The following years saw the tension between the two countries ease significantly, and in 1988 both attended the Seoul Summer Olympics, something they had not done since 1976. The next year, the first multiparty legislative elections took place in the USSR, an illustration of how the USSR was gradually evolving away from its old model. All these changes left the Soviet Union in a state of terrible vulnerability, exposed to attacks from the outside but more importantly from the inside. This internal weakness certainly allowed it to collapse as it did, contrarily to what most people expected. The following paragraphs seek to identify several reasons that could determine why the Cold War ended in the relatively peaceful way it did.

The most differentiating factor of the Cold War as opposed to all the wars that preceded it is that the two leading powers had the ability to destroy the entire planet in a matter of hours, and that this alternative started to settle in people's minds as the only possible outcome of the conflict. According to A.L. George:

The MAD environment of "Mutually Assured Destruction" encouraged both sides to accept the necessity of avoiding direct military confrontations, of maintaining a sharp distinction between conventional and nuclear weapons, and of condoning the first use of the latter only as a last resort in defense (qtd. in Kegley 17).

This tremendous power that stood in the two leaders' hands made them even more worried about the future and created a state of permanent tension among populations. Furthermore, the precedents established by the United States with the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima gave the Soviets strong reasons to be afraid of American reactions towards the spread of Communism. In the end, none of the two leaders wanted to make the first strike, but each one feared that the other might do so at any time. According to Kegley:

Of the explanations of the sources of Soviet surrender, perhaps the one that is the most popular among political realists from the right is the corollary proposition that nuclear deterrence drove Soviet leaders to abandon any hope that they might have harbored about prevailing militarily over the West (Kegley 16).

This dilemma placed the Soviet leadership in a very difficult situation: it knew that it could not keep up in terms of power, but at the same time it tried to keep its position as the world's second nuclear power.

The Cold War arms race was "the largest strategic and conventional peacetime military buildup the world had yet seen" (Waltz 46). According to Richard Ned Lebow, "The nuclear arms race reduced international politics to a primitive spectacle of two giants eying each other with watchful suspicion. Human survival depended on mutual restraint" (Lebow 253). The United States spent tremendous amounts of money on expanding their military capacity; a 1988 study by Robert Higgs for the Cato Institute estimated that over \$6.5 trillion were spent between 1948 and 1987 (Higgs 2-3). The United States knew that their economy could allow them to sustain strong military expenditures, and figured the Soviet Union might not be able to afford keeping up with them. According to Kegley:

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By engaging Moscow in a prohibitively expensive arms race, and by staging, in 1984, a fake “disinformation” test of the Strategic Defense Initiative system to fool the Soviets, the United States forced the Soviet Union into a competition, which exhausted their economic capacity (Kegley 13).

This suggests that the arms race was part of the American strategy to destabilize the Soviet economy, like their agreement with Saudi Arabia to increase oil production in order to drag down prices and kill Soviet oil exports. These moves by the United States were very well played, because they could have dire consequences on the Soviet economy without having to physically intervene. Therefore, it appears apparent that the Soviet’s inability to keep up with American military spending, and in essence its loss of the arms race was a determinant factor in precipitating its fall.

Once the arms race had gone on long enough and the Soviet Union no longer seemed like a threat, Ronald Reagan started to introduce the idea of scaling back on military arsenal buildup as early as November 1985 at the Geneva Summit (Gaddis 230). The Soviet leader showed the world that he was willing to move away from the military focus that had prevailed over the last decades, and he had realized that “Security cannot be built endlessly on fear of retaliation, in other words, on the doctrines of ‘containment’ or ‘deterrence.’... In the context of the relations between the USSR and the USA, security can only be mutual, and if we take international relations as a whole it can only be universal” (Kappen 1994). Several rounds of negotiations eventually led to the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in December of 1987. The 1989 Moscow Summit gave birth to the START I Treaty, and shortly after it Gorbachev ordered the retreat of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. At this point the USSR had clearly changed its stance and had acknowledged that the military buildup was too much of a drag on the already struggling economy. This not only showed the world that the Soviet Union was no longer the superpower it had been in its best years, and that it had become less of a threat on the international scene, but also added another layer of vulnerability to the Soviet empire.

Along with the strong cuts in defense spending, Gorbachev also intended to implement deep structural reforms in the communist system. The first important one was *perestroika* (restructuring), which allowed for more freedom for private business and investments. It was even the subject of a book by Mikhail Gorbachev, in which he acknowledged, “the need for change was brewing not only in the material sphere of life but also in public consciousness” (Gorbachev 1987). *Perestroika* was followed by *glasnost* (openness), which increased freedom of the press in order to bring down corruption among the leadership, among other goals. However, these policies were only barely enforced, and Lebow argued:

Gorbachev never attempted to dismantle the command economy or to encourage private capitalist ventures. He backed away from his most important initiatives in this direction when they encountered opposition from conservative party and public opinion (Lebow 266).

Lebow further argues that “the sharp downturn in the Soviet economy came only after Gorbachev began his reforms and largely as a result of them.” Gorbachev’s failed policies only made matters worse for the economy, and by giving people a fraction of what they could get under a non-communist government, he unwillingly dealt a fatal blow to his already wounded country. The few people that still had faith in the communist ideal could do nothing against a tremendous majority craving for change and freedom. This majority was the fuel of the uprising that shortly after was able to overthrow its rulers and claim back its rights.

The Soviet regime collapsed on itself because no one was left to support it. The communist ideal had literally faded from people’s minds, and they had a hard time imagining any benefit of that system. According to Francis Fukuyama:

Émigrés from the Soviet Union have been reporting for at least the last generation now that virtually nobody in that country truly believed in Marxism-Leninism any longer, and that this was nowhere more true than in the Soviet elite (Fukuyama 1989).

This was determinant because the leaders themselves knew that nothing could resist the will of people who had been suffering for decades, and one cannot enforce a system without the remote conviction that it might work and be

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beneficial. In a 1992 article published in the *New York Times*, Leslie Gelb makes the statement that “The Soviets lost the Cold War because of the rot of the Communist system far more than [the United States] won it by the policy of containing Soviet power” (Gelb 1). This means that the Soviet Union was doomed and could only last so long, until the flaws of the communist model became too apparent for people to accept it without question. Abandoned from all sides, the communist society needed only a triggering event to precipitate it into the ground. The revolutions in Eastern Europe proved to be a perfect trigger, and in a few months the Soviet people would destroy what the Communist Party had built over seven decades.

The series of revolutionary uprisings in Central and Eastern Europe not only led to the collapse of the Soviet Union but also to one of the most marking single events of the twentieth century, considered as the turning point of the Cold War: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany. The country that triggered this revolutionary wave was Poland in 1989. According to Daniel Klenbort:

By 1987, Gorbachev made it clear that he would not interfere with internal experiments in Soviet bloc countries. As it turned out, this was a vast blunder... If Poland could become independent, why not Lithuania and Georgia? Once communism fell in Eastern Europe, the alternative in the Soviet Union became civil war or dissolution (qtd. in Kegley 24).

This approval by Gorbachev paved the way and Poland took the first steps by first legalizing the non-communist party, Solidarity, and holding elections in August of 1989, which saw Tadeusz Mazowiecki installed as prime minister after over four decades of communist party ruling. Poland was soon followed by Hungary whose new prime minister Miklós Németh was responsible for several major reforms as well as the decision to remove the barbed wire at the Austro-Hungarian border (Tucker 2008). The revolutionary wave then hit East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania which all saw their governments removed and, in the case of Romania, their head of state promptly executed. This falling apart deeply weakened the USSR, and one of its last remaining assets was East Germany.

Despite all the apparent structural and ideological issues tearing apart the Soviet Union, world leaders and international relations scientists were confident that the USSR’s strong position as a superpower could last several more decades, even if its relative power might decline. According to CIA archives, “The challenge of anticipating the Soviet collapse was even greater for US intelligence because the very notion of collapse was inconsistent with the thinking of most Western analysts and scholars” (CIA 23). It appears that Eastern thinking was more confident with this notion, and when weekly demonstrations started in Leipzig in September of 1989, they quickly grew from 1,000 to 300,000 protesters on October 23. Despite government threats of using deadly force to counter protesters, the police were outnumbered and the demonstrations made relatively little harm. Those events then led to the half-a-million-strong Alexanderplatz demonstration in Berlin, where the people claiming freedom forced the government to abandon border control, effectively letting the Berlin Wall fall and allowing hundreds of thousands of people to escape East Germany. After the revolutionary wave, Gorbachev had no choice but to acknowledge the fall of the empire he had inherited the reins of, and he met with US President George Bush at the Malta Summit in early December of 1989. Even though the meeting did not give birth to any treaty, Gorbachev’s statement spoke for itself:

The world is leaving one epoch and entering another. We are at the beginning of a long road to a lasting, peaceful era. The threat of force, mistrust, psychological, and ideological struggle should all be things of the past (BBC News).

The Malta Summit is therefore considered to be the final event of the Cold War.

Even though the Cold War belongs to the past, political relations between the former Soviet Union’s largest republic and the United States have not been very harmonious since then. While the United States and President G.W. Bush did support Boris Yeltsin, the first Russian president, tensions have risen since Vladimir Putin took over in 2000. Because of Putin’s strong grasp over his country and his disagreement with the US on certain issues, the situation has not essentially improved since the end of the Cold War. As we have seen recently with the Crimean crisis, the differences between the West and Russia have all but disappeared, and Russia’s current expansionist stance reminds the Western world of the late Soviet Union. One could suggest that the Russian attitude towards the Western lifestyle is ideological, and that the Russian people do not yearn for a political system akin to that of the US

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and other Western states. The acceptance of economic sanctions by the Russian people is a perfect example of their approval and commitment to Vladimir Putin, who saw his approval rating increase by more than ten points to eighty percent since the crisis began, according to a report by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion released on March 19, 2014. The Russian people have shown that they need a strong, charismatic leader behind whom they can stand united, and it is possible that the Western view will never be able to prevail in Russia.

The way the Cold War ended was mostly unexpected and surprised almost everyone in the field of international relations. In fact, the situation was considered so stable it would go on for several more decades, and was even referred to as the “Long Peace” by certain scholars such as Kenneth Waltz and Richard Ned Lebow. Because of the very nature of the conflict and the importance of nuclear weapons, we have shown that the principle of Mutually Assured Destruction played a determinant role in the Cold War’s peaceful ending. Without the destructive power of their nuclear arsenals, the two superpowers might have continued to fight proxy wars or even attack each other directly in their perpetual struggle for influence. This destructive power and the decades-long arms race that it caused left the Soviet Union with a huge military arsenal that turned out virtually worthless, and a devastated economy with tremendous budget deficit and very low living standards. When the two blocs agreed to slow down on their armament and began the demilitarization policies, the Soviet Union realized it had not only lost the arms race but had also wasted a tremendous amount of resources at the detriment of its own citizens’ quality of life. At the heart of this social misery, Gorbachev’s barely-applied policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* seemed like the only hopes of a better life for all the people of the Soviet Republics. The Soviet Union’s population of over 280 million in 1989 realized that the ideals carried by their leaders for seven decades had completely failed and left them with nothing. All these factors accelerated the fall of the Soviet Union and caused it to rot from the inside, even though the Soviet leaders’ biggest fear was from the outside.

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