

Dissolution of the Soviet Union

The Dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991, marked the end of the Cold War. It began in the late 1980s with growing unrest in the various constituent republics, and ended on December 26, 1991, when the Supreme Soviet voted to dissolve.

This article will elaborate upon the factors that lead to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The information from this article will be crucial for the world history segment of the UPSC Mains Exam.

The Origins of the Soviet Union

The Soviet Union (Alternatively known as the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics - USSR) was initially formed following the aftermath of the Russian Revolution in 1917. In 1922 it joined with its far-flung provinces to form a communist super-state. Vladimir Lenin was the first leader of the Soviet Union

The initial makeup of the Soviet Union was to resemble a society that practised 'true democracy'. But as time went on, it proved to be no less repressive than the Tsarist regime it had toppled years before. Only one party was allowed to exist - the Communist Party - and it demanded complete allegiance of every Russian citizen.

Totalitarian control was exercised in its absolute form when Joseph Stalin in 1924. Many aspects of Russian society such as political and social life as well as economic, administration and industrial activity were controlled directly by the state. Anyone who opposed Stalin found himself on a one-way ticket to a labour camp (Gulags) or executed out of hand after a show trial

Only an invasion by Germany in 1941 during World War II prevented internal strife. The war gave the USSR an excellent opportunity to improve upon its military industry which had stagnated thanks to Stalin's policies. By the end of World War II in 1945, the USSR had transformed into a major military power.

It was only after Stalin's death in 1953 when Soviet leaders denounced his brutal policies. But the Communist Party maintained firm control over the country. The focus now shifted to fighting the 'Cold War' with Western Nations and costly engagements in the 'arms race' against the United States. It used its large military and resources to support communism across the world and suppress anticommunist forces while maintaining its influence in Eastern Europe.

Glasnost Era and Mikhail Gorbachev

When Mikhail Gorbachev became the premier of the Soviet Union in 1985, he had inherited a stagnated economy and a political structure which would make reforms impossible.

To mediate this situation, Gorbachev introduced two policies that would, as he hoped, would transform the soviet union into a productive state. The first of this was the 'glasnost' or political openness. He lifted the ban on books that were earlier prevented from publishing because they went against communist ideas and gave new freedoms to all the citizens of the Soviet Republics

In March 1985, a longtime Communist Party politician named Mikhail Gorbachev assumed the leadership of the USSR he inherited a stagnant economy and a political structure that made reform all but impossible. Newspapers could print criticism against the government and for the first time, other political parties that were not communist could participate in elections.

The second set of policies was 'perestroika' or economic restructuring. It abandoned the previous policy of command economy by allowing individual ownership of property and setting up businesses while encouraging foreign investment in Soviet enterprises.

But these reforms were too little and too late. Because the economy was far too gone for it to be saved. Rationing, food shortage and long queues for essential commodities seemed to be the only result of Gorbachev's new policies, furthering resentment against his government

Revolution of 1989

When it came to foreign policy, the USSR had maintained a tight grip in Eastern Europe by installing communist governments there and intervening in those countries through military means.

Gorbachev changed that policy to that of non-intervention and even promised to withdraw Soviet troops in Afghanistan stationed there since 1979 (Soviet forces would withdraw by February 15, 1989) and reduce military presence in Eastern Europe.

The first revolution of 1989 took place in Poland when non-Communist trade unionists bargained for freer elections with much success. This was followed by peaceful revolutions across Eastern Europe culminating into the fall of the Berlin Wall in November of 1989.

The Fall of the Soviet Union

Matters came to a head when the independence movements reached within the borders of the USSR. The Baltic States of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia were the first to declare their independence from Moscow

On August 18, 1991 members of the Communist Party placed Gorbachev under house arrest citing "poor health" as the reason for his imprisonment. The Russian public knew better. The leaders of the coup declared a state of emergency.

The military that moved to support the coup was met by a human chain of protests in Moscow. Unwilling to fire on their own people the military withdrew and the coup collapsed

Upon his release, Gorbachev travelled to Minsk to broker a deal with the leaders of Belarus and Ukraine to break away from the USSR. Weeks later they were joined by other Soviet Republics in Central Asia after a meeting in Alma-Ata, modern-day Kazakhstan

But this was the end for Gorbachev as Boris Yelstin had become the new star of the Russian state. Boris had earned fame when he rallied the population of Moscow to defeat the coup that imprisoned Gorbachev. On December 25, 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev tendered his resignation as the last premier of the Soviet Union. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had ceased to exist.