

The Soviet Union

The Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics, (USSR), known commonly as the Soviet Union, was the world's first and biggest communist state in existence.

The Soviet Union was the face of communism that engaged in a rivalry between the capitalist forces of the West represented by the United States and NATO until its dissolution in 1991.

The Soviet Union is an important topic in the World History segment of the UPSC Mains exam.

Origins of the Soviet Union

The Soviet Union was born out of the fires of the Russian Revolution of 1917. The Bolsheviks, a radical left revolutionary group overthrew Russia's Tsar Nicholas II, ending centuries of monarchist rule. Taking over the territories of the former Russian Empire, the bolsheviks established a social state.

In the civil war that followed, the Bolsheviks fought and managed to entirely liquidate whatever was left of the old Tsarist order. In 1922 a treaty signed between Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan formed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The first chairman of the USSR was Vladimir Lenin. At its greatest extent, the USSR would grow to include about 15 Soviet Socialist Republics.

Chairmanship of Joseph Stalin

Joseph Stalin became the chairman of the Soviet Union upon Lenin's death in 1924. He effectively ruled as a dictator who ruled through fear and death. At the cost of leaving millions of his citizens dead, he turned what was a primarily agrarian industry into that of military and industrial one.

Forgoing the New Economic Policy favoured by Lenin, Stalin saw to the creation of a series of policies with special emphasis on the industrialization of agricultural production through collectivization. At the same rapid industrialization of other sectors was also stressed upon. These policies would form the basis of the Five-Year Plans. In the years to come, the Five-Year Plans would concentrate on military production.

To enforce collectivization of the agriculture sector, farmers were forced to give up their individual holdings in land or livestock and forced to join collective farms.

The higher-ups of the Communist Party (known as the 'Politburo') that the transforming privately held farms into large collectives would increase productivity and eliminate the food shortage that had plagued them since the end of the Russian Civil War. In the coming years, this notion would be proved false.

The haphazard transition towards collectivization led to a dramatic dip in agricultural production, as a result, it led to catastrophic food shortages across the Soviet Union. It would cause a famine on a titanic scale in which millions would perish. The Soviet Republic of Ukraine alone would lose 13% of its total population

Stalin even eliminated all opposition through the help of his secret police. On trumped-up charges of treason and a whole assortment of other related charges an estimated 600,000 Soviet citizens were executed. The rest would be exiled to the far ends of Siberia or to forced labour camps (the infamous Gulags)

Beginning of the Cold War

With the destruction of Nazi Germany at the end of World War II, the alliance of convenience between the Soviet Union and the United States began to crack.

In the name of liberating Eastern Europe from Nazi control, the USSR had installed communist-dominated governments in those countries, which in effect were puppet governments owing allegiance to the Soviet Union.

As a result, Americans and the British feared the spread of communism in Western Europe and beyond. In response to this fear, the U.S, Canada and its Western European allies formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1949.

To counter the NATO alliance, the Soviet Union formed the Warsaw Pact which consisted of communist-dominated nations of Eastern Europe in 1955. The Cold War had begun.

De-Stalinization of the Soviet Union

After Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev became the Premier of the Soviet Union by 1958. His tenure was marked by a series of political reforms that made the Soviet state far less totalitarian. Criticising Stalin and his policies, Khrushchev sought to raise the standard of living, gave freedom to those wrongfully imprisoned and ended the Gulag system of camps

On the international front, however, his tenure was the tensest era ever. Some of these include the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and the Suez Crisis of 1956

Stagnating relations between the Soviet Union and China along with a worsening food shortage condition across the Soviet Republics eroded his power base. The Politburo would remove him from office in 1964.

Space Race

The Soviets had initiated many space exploration programs in the 1930s as a part of their industrialization process. But it would not be until the 1950s that the full result of their efforts

The Soviets took the first shot at the space race when they launched the Sputnik 1 on October 4 1957. Sputnik 1 was the first-ever low Earth orbit artificial satellite to be launched. This was followed by the launching of the first human in space, Yuri Gagarin.

Not wanting to lag behind, the US President John F Kennedy would respond by making a tall claim of putting a man on the moon. This would be backed on July 16, 1969, when American Astronaut Neil Armstrong would become the first man to walk on the moon.

The Fall of the Soviet Union

It became apparent in the 1960s and 1970s that there was a huge gap between the Communist Elit and the average Soviet citizen in terms of wealth. The rapid push towards industrialization caused frequent shortages of food and other essential items. Even basic needs such as clothes and shoes became scarce.

The extreme divide between the wealth of the communist elite and the poverty of the common people became all too evident. It resembled the same wealth gap that was otherwise found in capitalist countries as Soviet propaganda had claimed. This led many from the younger generation to reject the communist ideology that had been otherwise accepted by their parents.

The Soviet economy suffered a major setback in the 1980s when the new US President, Ronald Reagan isolated the Soviet economy from the rest of the world through sanctions and driving oil prices to the lowest. This led to a dramatic dip in the revenue of the USSR as a whole.

The new premier Mikhail Gorbachev had initiated a few reforms by introducing new elements such as FDI (Foreign Direct Investment), loosening government control over the economy and even curbing the powers of the KGB.

But the fruits of these reforms took time to bear and it only hastened the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Political revolutions that first began in Poland spread to other parts of Eastern Europe finally culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

In order to salvage the situation, hairline party members staged a coup to oust Gorbachev in August 1991. But this only spurred on the democratic forces to come out in the open and oppose them. The coup was defeated in a dramatic event when troops moving to support it were turned back by the citizens of Moscow. Understanding that the communist hold over the USSR was at an end Gorbachev resigned as leader of the USSR on December 25, 1991.

With this act, the Soviet Union was officially dissolved on December 31, 1991.

