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Chapter 1

Historical Background on the Dissolution of the Soviet Union

1. Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union: An Overview 13
   Gale Encyclopedia of World History
   In 1922 the Soviet Union became the world’s first Communist state. It grew to be a world superpower and underwent many changes, the last of which were radical reforms introduced in the 1980s by Mikhail Gorbachev. The reforms were not a total success, and the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991.

2. A Coup Lives and Dies 24
   Voice of America
   In August 1991, members of the Soviet government staged a coup in Russia to take control of the country from President Mikhail Gorbachev. The unsuccessful coup was triggered by an impending union treaty that would have taken away much of the Soviet government’s power.
3. Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia Declare the Soviet Union Dissolved
   
   Michael Dobbs
   
   On December 8, 1991, leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia formally announced that the Soviet Union was disbanded. This 1991 article focuses on their agreement to establish the Commonwealth of Independent States to replace the Soviet Union and on what happened as a result of their decisions.

4. Mikhail Gorbachev Resigns as President of the Soviet Union
   
   Daniel Sneider
   
   On December 25, 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as president of the Soviet Union. This 1991 article in an American newspaper encapsulates Gorbachev's successes and failures, some as seen through the eyes of fellow Soviets. Gorbachev maintains that he accomplished the main goal of his life.

5. Tracing the Collapse of the USSR
   
   Jeremy Bransten
   
   This 2001 article summarizes the events leading up to and immediately following the breakup of the Soviet Union ten years earlier. Soviet power was not inescapable as predicted by its founder, Vladimir Lenin; the lifetime of Soviet communism turned out to be limited.

6. The United States Welcomes the New Commonwealth of Independent States
   
   George H.W. Bush
   
   In this 1991 U.S. Department of State dispatch, U.S. President George H.W. Bush wel-
comes the Commonwealth of Independent States and recognizes and welcomes the emergence of a free, independent, and democratic Russia. Bush also recognizes the independence of Ukraine, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan and recognizes as independent states the remaining six former Soviet republics.

CHAPTER 2

Controversies Surrounding the Dissolution of the Soviet Union

1. Perestroika Failed as a Program of Economic Restructuring 63
   
   Peter J. Boettke
   
   In this 1992 article, an American academic and author maintains that as a program of economic restructuring, perestroika was a complete failure. One of the main reasons he states for the failure was that perestroika was not tried; many of the programs introduced to radically restructure the economy were never implemented.

2. Perestroika Was Not a Total Failure 68
   
   Mikhail Gorbachev
   
   In his 2000 book, the ex-president of the Soviet Union contends that many things were accomplished as a result of the years of perestroika. Overall, foundations were laid for normal, democratic, and peaceful development of the Soviet Union and its transformation into a normal member of the world community.
3. Gorbachev’s Reforms Caused the Breakup of the Soviet Union  

*Michael Dobbs*

In his 1997 book, an American author and foreign correspondent contends that Mikhail Gorbachev set in motion the chain of events that led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev’s belief that the Communist Party could reform itself and his handling of the economy were major mistakes on his part.

4. The Coup of 1991 Was a Failure  

*The Economist*

This 1991 article from a British magazine declares that the Soviet coup of 1991 failed largely because of poor preparation and lack of the required military precision. The coup leaders were unwilling or unable to order the cold-blooded oppression that was needed to make the coup a success.

5. The Vote of the Soviet People Could Not Preserve the Union  

*James Platt, Translator*

In this 2006 article from a Russian magazine, Russian politicians, scholars, and political analysts offer their views on why the vote of the Soviet people to preserve the Soviet Union was ignored and who was to blame for the collapse of the Soviet Union.

6. Russia’s Sovereignty Destroyed the Soviet Union  

*Seweryn Bialer*

In this 1990 article, a respected Sovietologist maintains that the Russian parliament’s
declaration of sovereignty demolished the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union lost Russia, it lost both its legitimacy and its only power base.

7. The Soviet Union Was Abolished for Political and Personal Gain

Stephen Cohen

A professor of Russian studies maintains in this 2006 commentary in a British newspaper that the Soviet Union was abolished by Boris Yeltsin, backed by the Soviet elite. The Yeltsin ruling group ended the Soviet state in a way that lacked both legal and popular legitimacy.

8. The Outside World Contributed to the Soviet Collapse

Robert Strayer

In his 1998 book, an author contends that the outside world contributed significantly to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Influence by and greater knowledge of the Western world; foreign involvement, such as the war in Afghanistan; and developments in Eastern Europe all played a part.

9. The Afghanistan War Contributed to the Breakdown of the Soviet Union

Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash

Two academics make the case in this 1999 article that the war in Afghanistan was a key cause of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Failures in the war destroyed the morale and legitimacy of the army, disrupted domestic unity, and accelerated glasnost.
10. Neither American nor Western Pressure Brought Down the Soviet Union

Jack F. Matlock, Jr.

In this 2006 lecture, a former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union disputes some myths about the breakup of the Soviet Union. The United States did what it could to encourage a democratizing Soviet Union, but it did not engineer the Soviet collapse.

11. The Commonwealth of Independent States May Disintegrate

Vladislav Dobkov

A Soviet journalist asserts in this 1993 article that the Commonwealth of Independent States may fall apart. Two major threats are the personal disagreements and ambitions of some of its members and the continuing breakdown of the former Soviet Union.

12. The Commonwealth of Independent States May Endure for Some Time

John Gray

A Canadian correspondent contends in this 1992 article that the former republics of the Soviet Union are chained together by links of the past. In spite of the challenges it faces, the Commonwealth of Independent States may carry on in some form for quite a while.

CHAPTER 3

Personal Narratives

1. A Moscow Teen Talks About Perestroika and Glasnost

Yelena, as quoted in Deborah Adelman

A ninth-grade student in Russia describes
how things have changed for her and others in the former Soviet Union because of perestroika and glasnost. She explains why she hopes perestroika will be successful.

2. A Moscow Professor Takes Part in a Coup

Aleksei Kozhevrikov
In an e-mail to a friend at a U.S. university, a Russian historian discusses his participation in the 1991 coup. He tells how he climbed up on a wall when the situation became more dangerous and talks about the shooting he witnessed a minute or so later.

3. Azerbaijanis Remember the Day the Soviet Union Collapsed

Azerbaijan International
Eleven Azerbaijanis from different walks of life, and ranging in age from 20 to 71 years, tell how they learned the Soviet Union had been dissolved. They talk openly about their initial thoughts and reactions at the time and of any nostalgia they feel today for the Soviet period.

4. A Teenage University Student Talks About Life in the New Russia

Ilya, as quoted in Deborah Adelman
A nineteen-year-old fourth-year Russian university student describes his life and how he feels about it. He shares his thoughts about the quality of education, his attitudes compared to those of his father, the growing commercialism, his attitude toward the government, and how things are changing.
5. CIS-Generation Teens Speak Out About the Soviet Union

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

Four teenagers born after the collapse of the Soviet Union and living in the regions and republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tatarstan, Armenia, and Belarus speak out about their experiences as the first post-Soviet generation. They describe the positive notions of life in the Soviet Union they have inherited.

Glossary

Chronology

For Further Reading

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