



## **FACTORS LEADING TO THE SOVIET UNION'S COLLAPSE**

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After World War II, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) became the world's most powerful countries. However, the competition and distrust between the two powerful countries led to the Cold War, a period from 1947 to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, in which both sides competed for world dominance (Blakemore, 2022). This paper will analyze how the United States Cold War policies and the weaknesses of the Soviet system led to the downfall of the Soviet Union.

### **Background**

The leaders of the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, President Franklin Roosevelt, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and General Secretary Joseph Stalin, respectively, met in a conference at Yalta, Crimea, and hammered out a plan for the future of the war-torn European countries. The "Big Three" powers came to several agreements. First, defeated Germany would be forced to pay hefty reparations and be broken up and divided amongst them. "The leaders agreed in principle to four occupation zones, one for each country

at Yalta and also for France” (Luckhurst, 2020). Second, Great Britain, The United States, and the Soviet Union agreed that democratic elections would be held throughout Europe, including Poland (Luckhurst 2020, para. 6). Third, Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill also agreed to shift the borders of Poland westward in order to grant the Soviets additional land.

However, Stalin was only partially satisfied with the agreements. He felt that since the Soviet Union endured the most significant civilian and military casualties during World War II, the country should have been compensated more proportionately in the postwar agreements. As a result, the Soviets quickly moved to gain control of countries to its West, which they considered creating a buffer, but the United States and its allies saw it as an expansion. “Though he publicly agreed to free elections for liberated Europe, his [Stalin’s] forces were already seizing key state offices across central and eastern European countries for local communist parties” (Luckhurst, 2020, para. 7).

### **Containment Policies from the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics**

In response to the Soviet control over much of eastern and central European countries, the United States implemented a policy of containment in 1947, announced by President Truman. The Truman Doctrine “established that the United States would provide political, military, and economic assistance to all democratic nations under threat from external or internal authoritarian forces” (U.S. Department of State, n.d.; para. 2).

The United States was determined to stop the spread of communism and Soviet influence, so they were eager to support any nation fighting communism. For example, using the concepts of the Truman Doctrine, President Truman convinced Congress that if the United States did not support Turkey and Greece, those countries would become communist regimes. “President Truman requested that Congress provide \$400 million of aid to the Greek and Turkish

governments and support the dispatch of American civilian and military personnel and equipment to the region” (National Archives, 2022; para. 1).

The United States' support to European nations continued to expand through the 1948 passing of the Economic Cooperation Act or the Marshall Plan, which provided billions of dollars to any European nations struggling to recover from World War II (National Archives, 2022). “For the United States, the Marshall Plan provided markets for American goods, created reliable trading partners, and supported the development of stable democratic governments in Western Europe” (National Archives, 2022, para. 6). In addition, the Marshall Plan empowered democratic nations to fight against the spread of communism. It also significantly increased the influence of the United States in Europe.

However, the Soviet Union considered the Marshall Plan an attempt to spread western influence throughout Eastern Europe. In response, the Soviets began to establish containment policies. The Soviet Union would provide financial and military support for any eastern European nation that did not support western democracy. These policies established a stronghold on eastern and central European countries that Churchill was to characterize as an “Iron Curtain.” The Iron Curtain was “the political, military, and ideological barrier erected by the Soviet Union after World War II to seal off itself and its dependent eastern and central European allies from open contact with the West and other noncommunist areas” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023c, para. 1). Within 18 months of the conclusion of the Yalta conference, the Cold War began and lasted almost half a century (Blakemore, 2022).

### **Nuclear Arms Race**

The Cold War gave birth to many containment policies implemented by the United States and the Soviet Union, creating significant competition between the two powers. The most significant of these competitions was the nuclear arms race, which was a scramble for both countries to stockpile more nuclear weapons than the other.

In the early 1960s, Soviet influence and the nuclear arms race came to a head in Cuba, only 90 miles from the coast of Florida. Under the leadership of Fidel Castro, a revolutionary movement ousted the government of President Batista, who had made Cuba a virtual satellite of United States corporations and organized crime. Castro created close ties with the Soviet Union and a communist Cuban regime. In 1962, the Soviet Union attempted to install missiles in Cuba, which led to the Cuban Missile Crisis. The crisis involved the United States creating a naval blockade around Cuba to prevent the Soviets from shipping ballistic missiles and nuclear materials (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023a).

Moreover, the United States threatened to invade Cuba if the Soviets did not abandon their mission to arm Cuba. The Cuban Missile Crisis was the closest direct military confrontation between the two superpowers during the Cold War era. The world was on edge because both sides had sufficient nuclear arsenals to destroy Earth. The crisis ended when the Soviets abandoned their plan to put military bases and missiles in Cuba in exchange for closing several Western missile bases near the Soviet Union (Evans, n.d.).

It is difficult to estimate precisely how much funding the Soviets spent on nuclear weapons because they classified that information. However, the Soviet Union's stockpile peaked at 3,3000 nuclear weapons, while the United States peaked at 32,500 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023b). Considering that the Soviet Union produced more nuclear weapons than the United States, the assumption is that they spent more money on the arms race. According to an article released by the Los Angeles Times in 1995, "The nuclear arms race has cost the United States nearly \$4 trillion" (Vartabedian, 1995). If the Soviet Union had experienced a similar cost, it could have contributed to its eventual economic tailspin.

## **Financing the Cold War**

Not only did both sides spend significant sums of money on weapons, but they also spent billions to achieve the upper hand in developing space technology. Dominance in outer space would demonstrate which country was more scientifically advanced and could also have an advantage militarily. The Soviets were the first nation in the world to send a satellite into space. They were also the first to send a human being to space and orbit the Earth (Davis, 2023). Not to be outdone, the United States also sent men and satellites into space and surpassed the Soviet Union by putting men on the moon in 1969.

By 1974 it is estimated that the Soviet Union had a space budget of 7 to 14 billion dollars, which increased to 28 billion dollars by 1980 (Hardt & Holliday, 2000). This significant increase was in response to competition with United States spending: “The United States spent about \$30 billion on the space race from the time the Soviet Union launched its Sputnik satellite in 1957 until the moon landing in 1969” (Domitrovic & Broadwater, 2020, para. 3). Eventually, the Soviets’ military and space exploration put a tremendous economic strain on its struggling economy. Conversely, the more robust United States economy allowed it to spend money on arms and space technology without overtaxing its economy.

## **Soviet Union’s Collapse**

The failure of the Soviet Union in the Cold War was multifaceted. Throughout most of the Cold War, the international circumstances favored the Soviet Union. However, in the 1980s, the Soviet Union’s fortunes took a sharp downturn. Notably, the Soviet Union’s planned economy, which relied heavily on centralized control and bureaucratic decision-making, could not match the West’s economic growth and technological advancements. The Soviet system stifled creativity, hindered the development of new ideas and technologies, and created internal

dissension. In addition, the Soviet economy was plagued by inefficiencies, such as low labor productivity, shortages of consumer goods, and an inability to compete in the growing global markets.

However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Soviet Union experienced a boom in oil prices, their primary export, and essentially moved to occupy Afghanistan to boost their economic interests even further (Brown, 2013). The costly military action in Afghanistan contributed heavily to its economic decline. Eventually, their military expenditures in Afghanistan significantly drained its economy, leading to a resource diversion, ultimately weakening the country. The rigid and authoritarian political system did not act to change the situation. During this time, the United States continued its propaganda efforts and engaged the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in covert operations to thwart the Soviet's military progress (Coll, 2004).

The Soviet Union was further weakened because its attempts to spread communist ideology and influence worldwide had only limited success. Soviet support for leftist movements and governments was more than matched by the more successful efforts of the United States to subvert and overthrow leftist governments, particularly in Greece, Guatemala, Iran, and the Congo (CIA, 1972; Coll, 2004), among other countries., including North and South Korea. The United States also created a successful major international military response to block the attempt of North Korea, a Soviet client, to overrun South Korea (Ho Joo, 1995).

International pressure increased on the Soviet Union toward the end of the cold war; the Soviet's oppressive human rights record came under increased scrutiny and criticism, particularly in the West. The Soviets' poor human rights record, which the United States

massively publicized, eventually undermined Soviet legitimacy and support from the international community.

The United States' foreign policy clearly played a paramount role in the downfall of the Soviet Union. The United States adopted a foreign policy of alliances and cooperation, strengthening relations with other countries to contain the expansion of the Soviet Union (Henriksen, 2017). The United States was also aggressively undermining movements and governments that might have been partial to the Soviets. In addition, the strong United States economy enabled it to help rebuild its allies' economies and military capabilities. Consequently, the Western allies, united in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization ([NATO], Shiffrinson, 2020), were stronger economically than the Soviet Union allies of the Warsaw Pact, which included Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania (Cavendish, 2005; Norwich University Online, 2017).

The United States also used propaganda effectively to characterize the Soviet Union and its allies' communist governments as evil. The rhetoric of this propaganda weakened the influence of the Soviets internationally. However, "U.S. officials did not portray their efforts as propaganda. In their minds, they were simply providing accurate information about the world to those trapped behind the Iron Curtain" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023c).

### **Discussion**

The Soviet Union collapsed for many reasons, including political, economic, military, and internal factors. "The state lost control of both the media and the public sphere, and democratic reform movements gained steam throughout the Soviet bloc" (Ray, 2023; para. 2). Politically times were changing, and the global economy favored policies that began to welcome free markets. The traditional political and economic strategies of the Soviet Union were not



working, so new leaders like Mikhail Gorbachev implemented policies of openness and restructuring. These new policies opened the door for an open market and a more democratic view. Gorbachev's agenda and policies were intended to develop pseudo-free markets embedded in government-run industries. The Soviet people were starting to experience freedom, which made them lean more toward democracy and shy away from communism. This fledgling new political system and economy had challenges to overcome. Some have described the restructuring of the Soviet system, or perestroika, as including the least productive aspects of communism combined with a weak form of capitalism (Kryshtanovskaya & White, 2005). This view originates in part from the reality that the strength of the Soviet economy was a myth; the leadership was clearly blind to the lack of robustness needed to stimulate growth in a time of intense transition (Boettke, 1993). Some consider the combination of unsustainable military strength with the economic stress of change an insurmountable hurdle. Additionally, the failing economies of the Soviet satellite states, such as East Germany, complicated matters for the Soviet central government and increased the mounting pressures (Norwich University Online, 2017).

In the 1990s, the Soviet Union was still considered a world power economically; however, "shortages of consumer goods were routine, and hoarding was commonplace" (Ray, 2023), which belied a struggling economy. In addition, the Soviet Union could hardly afford its massive spending on the space race, the nuclear arms race, and the war in Afghanistan. These significant economic and political efforts drained resources away from the economy, particularly civilian and domestic investment, and created severe economic shortages (Kryshtanovskaya & White, 2005).

On the political front, the old-school communists pushed back on the new systems. Researchers have attributed the blindness among leaders as linked to the oppression of free thought and media. Particularly, Gorbachev's move toward free elections was threatening to the leadership of the communist system: "Gorbachev's decision to allow elections with a multi-party system and create a presidency for the Soviet Union began a slow process of democratization that eventually destabilized communist control and contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union" (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Again, for example, the United States and other countries' pressure, a disintegrating economy, and internal calls for East German independence weakened the notion of returning to the old style of communism and the mirage of a solid Soviet satellite alliance (Norwich University Online, 2017). As a result of these forces, the government and economy again collapsed from a more democratic-capitalistic government and economy to form an oligarchy as wealth became concentrated in a limited number of business people (Kryshtanovskaya & White, 2005).

Although the Soviet Union was ultimately responsible for its demise, the United States' cold war policies played a significant role. Arguably, the United States' international intervention, robust economy, full-throated propaganda effort against communism, and the building of effective alliances had considerable influences on the Soviet collapse.

### **Conclusion**

The efforts the United States made against Soviet expansion in the Cold War and the weakness of the Soviet system were both factors that weighed heavily in the collapse of the U.S.S.R. Most observers suggest that the downfall of the Soviet Union was due to its poor economic planning, social upheaval, military spending, and belated changes in the political views of the Soviet leadership. However, it is apparent that the United States policies, such as the

Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, impeded the Soviet's ability to expand its influence (National Archives, 2022).

For many years the Cold War was a competition for global dominance, and both countries committed huge expenditures to achieve these ends. As a result, the Soviets were under pressure to match the increasing United States spending on defense, nuclear weapons, and the space race. Eventually, this pressure weakened the Soviet economy, which was less robust than the United States. As domestic products grew scarce, the Soviet government, under Gorbachev, began to adopt new reforms that opened the door for democratic demands among the population. Soon, a groundswell of internal opposition against the Soviet system led to the Soviet Union's dissolution. However, the new Russian government proved even less stable than the U.S.S.R. Its breakup and a resulting hybrid form of government and economy does not closely resemble democracy and capitalism—elections are heavily biased toward those in power, and oligarchy replaces the potential for entrepreneurship and free markets.

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