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The Collapse of the Soviet Empire and Communism
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The sudden death of an ideology and an empire

Entering 1989 the Soviet Union and its informal but very real empire was already facing serious economic difficulties and a lack of confidence about attaining the ambitious aims of its official philosophy, called Marxism-Leninism: the creation of a new socio-political order based on communal property and abundance. However, no politician or analyst foresaw that by the end of the year all the communist one-party states of Central and South-eastern Europe would renounce dictatorship and switch to political pluralism. In 1990 they all held free elections won by parties opposed to the communists, discarded even the vestiges of Soviet-type Socialism, and started restoring capitalism, i.e. the market economy, while proclaiming their aim to return to the basic values of the West and the institutions built upon them. On 1 July 1991 the Warsaw Pact, the political-military organization of the Soviet Empire was dissolved by common consent, approved by Gorbachev, the President of the Soviet Union. On 25 December the Soviet Union itself was officially dissolved and its member states became internationally recognized sovereign, independent countries, all professing a commitment to political pluralism and the market economy. Never in human history did an empire disappear so suddenly and without bloodshed, and no profound political, economic and social changes took place in such a short period over such a large territory.

The causes of the collapse of the communist system are complex, they can be listed under the following headings: inherent or systemic, fundamental or substantive, incidental and immediate.

Inherent faults

The Soviet experiment of turning Karl Marx' (1818-1883) vision into reality was doomed from the outset. George F. Kennan argued already in 1947 "that Soviet power, like the capitalist world of its conception, bears within it the seeds of its own decay, and that the sprouting of these seeds is well advanced. ("X" article in *Foreign Affairs*, 1947)." "Of all the reason for the collapse of communism, the most basic is that it was an intrinsically nonviable, indeed impossible, project from the beginning. […] And the perverse genius of Marxism is to present an unattainable utopia as an infallibly scientific enterprise (Malia in Edwards 2000, 71)." In pursuit of the attractive aims of utopian communism ("from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs! - Marx in his

Critique of the Gotha Program, 1874)" "the Communists violated everything we know from anthropology that human beings, even in the most primitive circumstances, desire and practice. They virtually outlawed religion, property, and free speech, which are common to all societies (Pipes in Edwards 2000, 46)."

Right from the beginning the system was built on intimidation, repression and terror inflicted upon the whole society – measures and methods that can work only temporarily, because people never genuinely acquiesce in them. The strongest appeal of communism for the poorer

section of society was the promise of improvements in their standard of living, first by exploiting the well to do, and eventually by creating abundance in all material goods. But an economic system that banned all private property, and stifled individual initiatives, was unable to improve living conditions. For more backward national communities, primarily for the Russians, but to a lesser extent for all people living in the eastern half of Europe, communism held out the hope of catching up with the advanced West and even overtaking it. But with growing prosperity in the West this promise evaporated, and by the 1980s hardly any in the communist world believed in a bright economic future.

Fundamental shortcomings

Lenin and his Bolshevik party, having attained power in a coup on 7 November (25 October, old style) 1917, sincerely believed that communism would quickly spread to the rest of the world, but were realist enough to know that "power grows out of the barrel of a gun," so they tried to advance the world revolution also by war. Initially the Bolsheviks owed much their victory to the non-Russian population of the Czarist Empire, for whom they promised self-determination and the right to secede. By 1922, however, the Bolsheviks brought most territories of the former Russian Empire under their control, and established the Soviet Union. Nominally it was a federation, but in fact it was a strongly centralized state run by Russians or people assimilated to the Russians, like the Georgian Djugashvili, assuming the name Stalin. Once he eliminated all his potential rivals in the "Great Terror," and defeated Hitler, Stalin directed his Red Army, relying on a few local communists, to impose the communist system on all the countries in the eastern half of Europe, which came under Soviet control by the end of World War II. But "Marxism-Leninism was an alien doctrine imposed on the region by an imperial power whose rule was culturally repugnant to the dominated peoples (Brzezinski in Edwards, 21)." The "captive nations" made serious efforts to escape from the oppressive system (Hungary with the uprising in 1956, Czechoslovakia with the "Prague Spring" in 1968, and Poland on several occasions), but the armed intervention of the Soviet Union and the "Brezhnev Doctrine" assured continued Soviet domination – for the time being. These interventions shattered many illusions about Soviet communism in the West and in the "Third World," discrediting the slogans, which were propagated by paid agents and credulous intellectuals.

After the death of Stalin (1953) many of his crimes were revealed by Khrushchev, his successor, and cautious economic reforms started. Détente apparently signaled the end of plans to launch an invasion of Western Europe, but in Latin America, Africa and Asia Soviet policies continued to spread revolution and the doctrines of communism. That, however, put a great strain on the flagging Soviet economy. With the easing of terror intellectual opposition grew, helped by the publicity given to it by the western media, especially radio broadcasts, notwithstanding the jamming of them. The writer Solzhenitsyn, the physicist Sakharov (the "father" of the Soviet "H" bomb), the historian Amalrik and many others defied persecution, prison and psychiatric abuse, enlightening the public inside and outside the Soviet Empire about the crimes and fallacies of "the system." Despite recurring campaigns to wipe out all dissent (the latest in the mid-1980s by ex-KGB chief turned Soviet leader Andropov) the desire for freedom proved impossible to restrain.

From the 1970s on an increasing number of scholars and researchers, mainly from more open satellite countries like Poland and Hungary, were able to travel to the West, thanks to scholarships and academic exchanges sponsored by the Ford Foundation, the Fulbright Commission and other American institutions. They were followed by economic bosses and even by party apparatchiks, widening business and improving political relations. These visitors became

aware of the superiority of the West both in the quantity and the quality of goods, a stark contrast to the empty stores and general scarcity typical of their own countries. Prosperity proved to be one of the most powerful weapons of the West in the later phase of the Cold War. The affluence of the West became obvious to the everyday citizens, too, in the countries closer to the Iron Curtain -- a wall that could prevent them escaping, but could not keep away the images broadcast by western television. With the coming of satellites the communist blockade of the mind was gone.

The West also impressed the population of the communist bloc, especially but not exclusively the young, by its culture, films, fashion and especially pop music. While rock'n'roll was still banned throughout the Soviet Empire in the 1950s, later it penetrated the walls and the barbed wire. America was now admired in the Soviet bloc not so much as the land of the pioneers, the noble native Indians and the skyscrapers, but as the home of the best music and the most attractive film stars. Starting in the late 1970s bands appeared on the Soviet and East-Central European stages, often playing music with an unmistakably political, even rebellious message.

Incidental causes

Marxism declared the victory of communism as historically inevitable, but a system based on coercion, economic irrationality and incompetent leadership was bound to fail on the long run. There were also quite a few providential incidents, mainly related to individuals, which helped undermining the system and brought closer its demise.

The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was meant by the Soviets to consolidate and legalize the division of Europe, but it backfired. The signing of the Helsinki Final Act and the follow-up conferences gave a boost to dissent all over the communist bloc, by "firmly entrenching human rights on the diplomatic agenda (Kovrig 1991, 167)." The election of a Pole, Karol Wojtyla as Pope in 1978, electrified not only his restless compatriots but all people in Central Europe. He spoke out for human dignity and eternal values, challenging the very foundations of Communism. His visit to Poland in 1979 undoubtedly contributed to the birth of a genuine workers' movement, the ten million strong Solidarity Free Trade Union, led by the charismatic personality of an electrician in the Lenin Shipyard at Gdansk, Lech Walesa.

Most political leaders in Western Europe (except British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher) acquiesced in the division of Europe, and did not even dream of „winning" the Cold War. In the 1970s the United States started to venture beyond merely containing the Soviet threat, when two foreign-born national security advisers, Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, initiated differentiation within the Soviet bloc, rewarding any country that diverted a bit from the Soviet line. "Most Favored Nation" status and, as a concomitant, increasing exports to the U.S. was a real carrot for the command economies always in dire need of convertible currency. Polish-born Brzezinski advised President Carter to show at least as much interest in Eastern Europe as the Soviets were showing towards Latin America. The insincerity of Soviet slogans about détente were exposed by their increasing activity in the "Third World," building up their fleet, commissioning a large number of nuclear submarines, and by the deployment of medium range SS-20 missiles in the western region of the Soviet Union and (unannounced) in the Central European satellites. The response of NATO was deploying the newly developed cruise missiles and Pershing-II rockets on the territory of their West European allies, disregarding the protests of a large number of well-meaning but gullible people. The election of Reagan in 1979 as President placed a man at the helm of the U.S. who had strong convictions

about communism, and he undiplomatically called the Soviet Union "the Evil Empire," which it really was in the eyes of the peoples whose misfortune brought them under its control. Reagan did not like the doctrine of "Mutual Assured Destruction," the prospect that in case of a nuclear war fought between the two superpowers, both sides had the capability to destroy the other, even after suffering a first blow. Being aware of the great strides the U.S. had made in high tech weapons as well as in computer and space technology, he ordered work on SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative), to build a protective shield over the U.S. so that incoming enemy missiles and their nuclear warhead could be destroyed in space, never reaching their targets in the U.S. That was a project the Soviet Union was unable to answer. Its economy was incapable to bear the costs of this new phase of the arms race, and Soviet scientists lacked the technology to meet this challenge. That, and not Soviet concern for the well-being of the citizens, compelled the Soviet Politburo to seek new ways to make the Soviet economy perform better, in order to keep pace with the U.S. in the arms race and especially in space technology.

The man who was expected to reform the Soviet system without changing its basic nature was Mikhail Gorbachev, a man raised in the Communist Party apparatus and the KGB. He was elected Secretary General (de facto leader) in 1985, at the relatively young age of 54. By that time "socialism" was in an obvious crisis all over the Soviet Empire: production figures were falling (or at best stagnating), there was rising corruption and crime, rampant alcoholism and heavy pollution led to deteriorating health conditions and decreasing life expectancy. The most serious nuclear incident of history, the meltdown at the Chernobyl plant in 1986, the efforts to keep it secret, and the catastrophic consequences revealed the weaknesses of the Soviet system. The mood of the population was characterized by apathy and cynicism, people were fed up with the ever growing bureaucracy, and with the extravagant lifestyle of the Party apparatus, the "new ruling class." The falling birth-rate of the Russian half of the population was upset by the increasing number and proportion of the non-Slavs, particularly the Islamic Central Asians, but that was rather alarming. At the same time the West was overcoming its internal problems, the militant wing of the New Left, the terrorist "Red Brigades," were brought under control, and the electronic revolution started to penetrate the East. Gorbachev hoped to save the system by controlled change, to make it more effective, to advance its obsolete technology and to maintain its status as a superpower. His much acclaimed "openness" (glasnost') exposed the depth of the crisis, before the Soviet public and before the whole world. The other device, "restructuring" (perestroika), tried to reduce the influence of the incompetent, corrupt and increasingly senile Party leadership and to increase the role of elected central and local bodies (in 1988 he arranged for contested elections for a new legislature called Congress of People's Deputies), in order to use them against the reactionary *nomenklatura*, so as to build up a new Party, completely loyal to the personality and ideas of the new Soviet leader, soon to assume title of President of the Soviet Union.

People in Western Europe were elated to see such an enlightened Soviet leader, especially when he started a "peace offensive" by unilaterally reducing his armed forces in Central Europe, and recognizing the right of every country (by implication also of those in the Soviet bloc) to choose their own political course.

The immediate cause: Poland and Hungary pushing over the communist dominoes

Undoubtedly the most effective weapon of the West in the later phase of the Cold War was prosperity, its consumer goods, especially the car, the most important status symbol. That won over the citizens of all the communist countries, even their leaders became keen on western contacts, scholarships, and visits to the department stores. It became obvious that the So-

viet Union would never catch up with the West, let alone bury it, as promised by Khrushchev in the early sixties.

It was against that background that Poland and Hungary, two nations who had already defied communism and Soviet domination in 1956, and were ahead of all other members of the bloc in tolerating diversions from communist orthodoxy, bending to popular pressure, introduced measures which went much further than any previous attempt at change.

In Poland since 1956 the strong Catholic Church was no longer persecuted, the peasants were allowed to keep their private farms, and limited cultural freedom was tolerated. There were repeated local riots against food price rises, culmination in July 1980 in a massive strike in the coastal town of Gdansk. Its outcome was a genuine working class movement (the dream of Marx), the Solidarity Free Trade Union. The authorities were compelled to recognize it when its membership rose to ten million in a country having then 36 million inhabitants. This was rightly termed a "self-limiting revolution", since its avowed aim was not to overthrow the hated regime but to improve the living conditions, and to guarantee the right of the workers to strike. Walesa proved not only a charismatic but also a sensible leader, balancing between radicalism and compromise. This "dual power" lasted for one and a half years. The Soviet Union did consider military intervention, but with the war in Afghanistan and the need for European technological and humanitarian aid, that was not feasible. The alternative was martial law introduced on 13 December 1981, planned and carried out by General (by then Prime Minister and party leader) Jaruzelski. This was indeed “war on Polish society,” with Solidarity banned and 10,000 in detention, but was far from being a repetition of the brutal repression of the Hungarians in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Western sanctions (prompted by the U.S.) hit the economy and especially the party cadres. Finally a compromise was reached between the communist leadership and the still banned Solidarity leaders at the roundtable discussions in 1989, leading to the “semi-free elections” in June which were won by Solidarity. On …? President Jaruzelski felt compelled to appoint Mazowiecki, a non-communist Solidarity adviser as Prime Minister. Poland immediately started a return to the market economy.

Since the mid-1960s the repression in Hungary was eased and feeble economic reforms were introduced. Elements of the market and some private initiatives, especially in agriculture, were permitted. Gorbachev, whose earlier responsibility was agriculture, found that promising. With economic stagnation and with prices starting to reflect real costs, the Hungarian leaders had recourse to massive borrowing in order to prevent a decline in the standard of living. By the end of the 1980s foreign debt owed by Hungary amounted 21 billion dollars for a population of ten million. Growing business ties with the West made the Hungarian communist leaders interested in survival through change. The example of Spain, where a peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy took place, not hurting the officials of the previous regime, came to inspire the leaders of the modernizing Central and East European countries. The CSCE follow-up conferences of Madrid, Geneva, and Budapest were utilized by the Hungarian "dissidents," too, who openly criticized the regime, and a kind of alliance was formed between them, the conservative patriots, religious groups and discontented workers. Kádár, the party leader who betrayed the revolution in 1956 and was responsible for the subsequent repression, but later became a cautious reformer, was replaced in May 1988. The leader of the 1956 revolution, I. Nagy and his fellow-martyrs were given a moving re-burial on 16 June 16 1989 - attended by the world media, inspiring also the neighboring countries. Round-table talks started between the communist leadership and the by now legally recognized opposition parties. President George H. Bush gave strong encouragement to the movement for change by visiting Poland and Hungary in July 1989. By September the political talks resulted in an agreement changing the constitution, restoring a multi-party democracy and scheduling free elections for spring, 1990.

A social event organized by opposition parties in Hungary for 19 August 1989, the "Pan-European Picnic" was utilized by close to a thousand East German citizens to escape through that temporary hole in the Iron Curtain. That prompted tens of thousands of their compatriots to come to Hungary, hoping they, too, could leave for the West. Pressed by that crowd, also by the political opposition and by the Federal Republic, the Hungarian government announced on 10 September 1990 that the citizens of the "German Democratic Republic" would be permitted to cross the border and leave for the West. On 23 October, 1989, 33 years after the ill-fated Hungarian Revolution started, the Republic was proclaimed, replacing the "People's Republic."

In the GDR an umbrella organization demanding changes, *Neues Forum,* emerged and in mass demonstrations demanded changes and the right to visit their fellow Germans in the Federal Republic. Gorbachev declined to help to East German leadership. The successful escape of tens of thousands of East Germans made it pointless to keep the Berlin Wall closed. When a new, reformist leadership decided to open it, the people tore the Wall into pieces on 9 November 1989. That monstrosity, the symbol of the division of Europe, was gone, and a new democratic coalition was formed in Berlin, preparing the way for the reunification of Germany.

All that was too much for the Czechs to watch passively, and a series of mass demonstrations in Prague in late November led to the "velvet revolution" directed by the Civic Forum and by the Slovak Openness against Violence. On 29 November the communists started negotiations with the opposition and agreed to form a new government of national unity, headed by a reformist communist, while the parliament elected the well-know dissident playwright, Vaclav Havel, provisional President on 29 December 1989.

By that time the dreaded Romanian dictator, Ceausescu was dead. In mid-December bloody reprisals followed protests against the removal of a popular and outspoken Hungarian Calvinist pastor in the southwestern town of Timisoara. A mass rally called by the dictator in Bucharest turned against him and ended in his escape by helicopter from his palace. After widespread fighting between his security forces and the insurgents Ceausescu and his wife were captured and summarily executed. A Council of National Liberation, headed by a former close associate of the dictator, Iliescu, was formed.

Under far less dramatic circumstances Bulgaria, too, changed, Zivkov, the long-time party boss was replaced on 10 November 1989 by a reformist communist. The most closed and self-isolated communist country, Albania, also discarded communism in two steps by the end of 1991.

The aftermath: the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union

Half-hearted economic and legal changes brought the Soviet economy almost to a standstill in 1990, its former satellites were moving towards the West as fast as they could, and called for the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. All the 15 Soviet republics pressed for decentralization, and the Baltic republics demanded full independence. In June 1991 Russia elected its own President, the popular radical reformist Yeltsin, and he demanded full sovereignty. The hard-liners, probably with the connivance of Gorbachev, answered by a coup on 19 August 1991, trying to restore central authority, but the people of Moscow, led by Yeltsin, took to the streets and the *coup* collapsed. The Communist Party was banned, the Baltic States declared their independence, and the other republics soon followed suit. Gorbachev was sent into retirement, and on 25 December the red flag, the symbol of communism, was lowered from the Kremlin.

The communist utopia, once firing the imagination of millions in search of a better world, but causing enormous suffering and the violent death of tens of millions of innocent victims, ended fully discredited. The only good thing that can be said about it is that its downfall did not claim more lives. Contrary to Marx' predictions it was not the state that withered away but Marxist communism.

Perspectives for the U.S. following from the end of communism

The disappearance of the communist bloc meant not only liberation for hundreds of millions of people, it also left the U.S. as the sole superpower. Is it true that it was "not just the end of the Cold War, or a passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government"? (Fukuyama 1989, 2) Did that mean the elimination of future wars in a new "Pax Americana"? President George H. Bush confidently announced the coming of a "New World Order," where the noble principles embodied in the Charter of the United Nations will finally prevail, guaranteed by the authority of the U.S.

The new dangers, however, soon became manifest. The elimination or just the control of weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, chemical and biological ones) proved impossible, and their use by rogue states or by small groups of terrorists could not be excluded. Old and new infectious diseases as well as environmental and climatic hazards also faced the post-communist world. Nor were relatively smaller "local wars" made impossible, and soon such wars, occasionally taking the proportion of genocide, appeared in the Balkans and in Africa. The breakup of Yugoslavia and the inability of the European institutions to end it showed that without military intervention led by the U.S. such national, ethnic conflicts cannot be brought to an end. The upsurge of violence in the Middle East showed that even the full engagement of the U.S., trying to be "an honest broker" under President Clinton, was not enough to bring the opponents to a compromise.

The "peace dividend," a massive reduction in military expenditure, also proved illusory. The new threats needed new, even more sophisticated and more expensive weapons as well as soldiers trained for new types of war.

The solidarity of the Atlantic Alliance was strong as long as the Soviet Union presented a common danger, and for Europe a more direct one. The subsequent instability on the territory of the former Soviet Union and in the Balkans helped the preservation of NATO and its enlargement with several members of the one-time Warsaw Pact. While some Europeans feared that the U.S. might fall back to isolationism, others thought that the European Union should disentangle itself from what they called the American "hiperpower" and emerge as an independent superpower, even as a rival.

The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001 shattered the belief that the territory of the U.S. was not vulnerable, terrorism came to threaten every country. Many people drew the conclusion that the pre-1990 bipolar world was more stable, because the unruly states and groups were under control. It was forgotten that during the Cold War nuclear confrontation, with all its terrible consequences, was a real possibility. Now terrorism brought together the old enemies of the Cold War: the U.S., Russia and China. The "evil Empire" was replaced by an extremely dangerous but less manageable and more irresponsible "axis of Evil," at least according to a large part of the American body politic.

Be as it may, many Europeans, and particularly "the New Europe," the countries of Central Europe, are remaining firm "Atlanticists," committed to the maintenance and strength of NATO and its leading power, the U.S. Based on their terrible experiences in the 20th century,

they are convinced that all the new threats to peace, stability and prosperity can be answered only jointly, under the leadership of the U.S. They agree that "the only real alternative to American leadership is international anarchy." (Brzezinski 1997) But in order to overcome the new dangers the U.S. must regain the respect and sympathy of the world, which can be attained only if "hard power" – military, economic and political strength - is matched by "soft power," diplomacy, genuine partnership and intellectual excellence.

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