

**THE IMPACT OF GORBACHEV'S REFORMS ON THE
DISINTEGRATION OF THE SOVIET UNION**

by

KEITH CECIL CARLYLE

submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the subject

HISTORY

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

SUPERVISOR: DR. T. M. DEDERING

JULY 2002



SUMMARY

This dissertation of limited scope traces the attempts by Gorbachev (1985-1991) to reform an economic, political and social system which was in a state of terminal decline.

The origins of its demise, it is argued, lay in the ossified command economy inherited from Stalin. The enormous damage inflicted on Soviet agriculture during collectivisation in the 1930s, when millions of productive peasants died, proved to be a fatal blow to that sector.

Thus, Gorbachev followed a two-fold strategy of reform. *Glasnost* (openness) was introduced to allow constructive debate on economic and social matters. Despite a hesitant beginning, the right to criticise allowed the emergence of more radical campaigners, such as Yeltsin who demanded greater democracy. Significantly, the revival of ethnic nationalist demands in the republics led to disintegration.

Perestroika (restructuring) was intended to modernise and boost living standards. The economy faltered but the market was not yet in place.

TEN KEY WORDS

Cold war
stagnation
glasnost
bureaucracy
perestroika
failure
conflict
coup
collapse

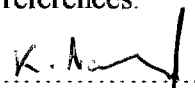
UNISA LIBRARY
2007 -03- 12
Class
Access



947.0854 CARL

DECLARATION

I declare that THE IMPACT OF GORBACHEV'S REFORMS ON THE
DISINTEGRATION OF THE SOVIET UNION is my own work and that
all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged
by means of complete references.



KEITH CECIL CARLYLE.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

1. Introduction

9. Chapter 1: The background to decline.
 9. 1.1. The struggling Soviet economy and Gorbachev: the background.
 - 14 1.2. The Soviet Union under Brezhnev: 1964-82.
 16. 1.3. External commitments and the internal economic decline of the Soviet superpower.
 20. 1.4. The security organs, the suppression of dissidents and the bureaucracy.
 23. 1.5. The multi-national character of the Soviet Union.
 26. 1.6. A brief biographical portrayal of Gorbachev.

28. Chapter 2: *Glasnost* and the disintegration of the Soviet state.
 28. 2.1. *Glasnost* and political change.
 37. 2.2. The struggle for a civil society.

46. Chapter 3: The domestic socio-economic and political consequences of *perestroika*.
 46. 3.1. Economic reforms and the Communist legacy.
 53. 3.2. The transformation of the Communist Party.
 54. 3.3. The first signs of failure.
 62. 3.4. Factors hindering opposition to Gorbachev's reforms.

66. Chapter 4: The rise of militant nationalism in the Soviet republics.
 66. 4.1. The collapse of the "outer empire".
 68. 4.2. Ethnic conflict in the Soviet republics.
 76. 4.3. The changing position of Russia within the Soviet Union.
 81. 4.4. Islamic fundamentalism and the war in Afghanistan.
 82. 4.5. The secession of the Baltic states.
 84. 4.6. The August coup and collapse of the Soviet Union.

87. Conclusion.

91. Bibliography.

INTRODUCTION

The gradual collapse of the Soviet Union in the second half of the penultimate decade of the twentieth century was definitely an event of enormous significance for both the USSR and the entire world order. It dramatically altered the geo-strategic balance of power which had prevailed in post Second World War Europe, bringing an end to the Cold War. Much of the credit for this dramatic unraveling of the status quo can be ascribed to the actions and efforts of one individual: Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev.

This dissertation of limited scope explores the political and economic consequences unleashed by Gorbachev's reforms. It is divided into four main chapters. Chapter 1 examines the historical context in which he was operating as a reformer. A comparison with the only previous major reformer in the Soviet era, Nikita Krushchev, will be drawn. He had attempted to humanise Soviet socialism and bring some degree of structural reform with a measured degree of success - chiefly by abolishing mass terror as a political instrument - and had been ousted by Leonid Brezhnev in a Party - based coup in 1964. Whilst Krushchev had headed the Soviet state in the 1950s after Stalin's death in 1953, his fate had always provided a sobering background to any future reformer and Gorbachev was no exception.

This mini-thesis will examine a number of factors which have occupied observers. Thus, what was the Soviet state? Was it a national entity on its own or was it the old Tsarist empire which Lenin and Stalin had transformed into a single political union masquerading as the world's first socialist state? The structural weaknesses of the Soviet Union were most strikingly evident in the command economy inherited from Stalin and which had, in the 1930s, propelled a previously agrarian society into a major industrial power. Since the death of the dictator in the early 1950s, the Soviet economy remained locked into the central planning of all commodities and the market played little role in regulating it. This was especially most evident in its manner of operating and, despite the relative improvement in living standards, the basic economic structure of Stalinism

remained in place. Supply and demand was no consideration in the economy's functioning and consumer goods were especially in short supply. Indeed, when available they were invariably of inferior quality and there was little scope for any kind of export driven production to improve standards of quality control. The Soviet economy focused on the production of heavy industrial goods, with the military receiving the lion's share of already scarce resources. This first chapter will examine how the preoccupation with central planning resulted in huge distortions. Bureaucrats (the *apparats*) dictated the quantity of goods manufactured in every region of the Soviet Union and the workers paid little attention to the final product. Not surprisingly, shortages came to characterise daily life under communism. Other vital features which merit important consideration were rampant alcoholism (at the work place), absenteeism and the disastrous state of Soviet agriculture. Indeed, the failure of the empire to feed its population despite its ample resources proved to be a telling indictment of the USSR and its system. This was the legacy which the new General Secretary inherited and provides the background to *perestroika*. Finally, a brief biographical sketch of Gorbachev will be provided at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 2 concentrates on *glasnost* (openness) and its unintended role in bringing about the disintegration of the Soviet state. Thus dramatic and destabilising effects on the Soviet totalitarian regime occurred. The regime had rigidly controlled the civil liberties of citizens, prescribed what books or newspapers ordinary people could read and is rightly the focus of an entire chapter. Of crucial importance to bear in mind is that Gorbachev, on succeeding Konstantin Chernenko at the helm of the Soviet Communist Party (or CPSU) on 11 March 1985, had initially no intention of dismantling the Soviet political system which enshrined in its constitution the leading role of that Party. This provided it with a complete monopoly on the economic system and political organisation.

Thus, Chapter 2 will concentrate on both short term and long term goals which Gorbachev set himself and his team of reformers. The overwhelming expectation was that the controlled admission of public criticism and the airing of grievances would facilitate the smoother functioning of the prevailing system which Soviet ideologists termed 'developed socialism'. The rule of Leonid Brezhnev

(1964-1982) was labelled by the new leadership as 'the era of stagnation' and was particularly criticised for its reversion to the Stalinist tactic of the stifling of all debate, whether political or economic. Thus, reasoned the reformers, a certain amount of political liberalisation was essential for the sake of renewing both society and political structures. Without it, how could the already well known levels of apathy and corruption which were to be found all over the USSR to be combated? It must be stressed that the new General Secretary always maintained his Marxist credentials and insisted he was a dedicated disciple of Lenin.

Yet, *glasnost* proved to be a genie, which once released from its proverbial bottle, would rapidly confront both leaders and ordinary Soviet citizens with many unexpected challenges during the late 1980s and early 1990s. There existed a very powerful anti-reform block within the CPSU which was implacably opposed to *glasnost* and its potential consequences for the authority of the Party. Whilst the economy faced a systematic crisis, which was acknowledged even by hard-line communists, many decision-makers favoured more the Chinese approach which stressed the need for economic reform while continuing to emphasise the unchallenged right of the Communist Party to govern. Attention will, however, be paid to Gorbachev's broader social and political vision as many observers were aware that *glasnost* was necessary to renew a moribund dysfunctional society, economy and political structure which was dying a slow death. Eventually, the liberalisation of the media, the continued damning exposures of Stalin's crimes and the subsequent election in 1989 of an elected, though imperfect, Congress of People's Deputies were developments which would lead to the collapse of Communist rule in the USSR and the end of Soviet power. Gorbachev did, once settled in office, reform the CPSU leadership, easing out many hardliners. An example was the brief elevation of Andrei Gromyko to the Presidency, a largely ceremonial position at the time. He had been foreign minister since Stalin's time. But, Gorbachev's major achievement was the election of a Congress of People's Deputies, which though far from perfect, did allow a considerable degree of genuine democracy in its election.

Chapter 3 focuses on how Gorbachev attempted to grapple with the dire

state of the command economy, particularly of his remedy of *perestroika* or restructuring for its sorry state. Central planning of all legitimate economic activity had spawned a gigantic bureaucracy which possessed a major overriding interest in maintaining Soviet socialism in its unreformed state. This *apparat* was assisted in its attempts to swim against the fresh tides of reform, particularly *perestroika*, by allying itself with ideological conservatives who regarded the new reforms as a betrayal of their Marxist-Leninist principles. The command economy, it must be conceded, had been of great value in repelling the invasion of Nazi Germany, but had long since ceased to satisfy the public's demand for consumer goods. On the other hand, credit for furnishing the huge supplies which kept the Soviet Red Army in the field must also go largely to the United States. This reality was often ignored by Soviet commentators, which is perhaps not surprising considering the USSR's huge losses in terms of human lives and the enormous destruction of its cities and towns it suffered.

Chapter 3 will also explore how *perestroika* had such a disastrous effect on the Soviet economy with both industry and agriculture actually rapidly deteriorating. Various commentators have examined the reasons for this and these will be alluded to and analysed. Also to be discussed will be why, after seventy years of stamping out all manifestations of private economic activity, the Soviet Union fared so poorly. The absence of private property due to ideological dictates was, I will argue, a major reason for *perestroika*'s dismal results, as the absence of a legal framework for it was a *sine qua non* for any successful implementation of the policy. The recognition of the need for a law-based society and state was one of Gorbachev's preoccupations as it was a prerequisite for the necessary investment, whether foreign or domestic. The evolution of Gorbachev from being a cautious reformer to finally embracing the need for a market economy is an important theme in Chapter 3. Gorbachev was, indeed, a unique species of Soviet communist. As leader in the Stavropol region of the Union he became aware of the great waste of industrial commodities and grain. Additionally, his rise in the hierarchy of the CPSU had afforded him the privilege to travel abroad and he had witnessed personally the huge gulf between the West and his own country. Seeds

of doubt as to the superiority of socialism must have been implanted in his mind.

Chapter 4 deals with the problems which the new climate engendered by Gorbachev's reforms had on the vexed nationality question, and how these fifteen republics, differentiated along linguistic, cultural and religious lines, came to rapidly unravel in six short years. The resurgence of militant ethnic nationalism was a direct consequence of *glasnost*, although most observers were aware that the old repressive methods previously operating had merely obscured far deeper problems which lay beneath the surface. It is clear, given the demographic and historical realities prevailing, that the forces tending towards the dissolution of the Soviet state were far too powerful for any non-repressive politician to arrest.

The rise of nationalism in all regions of the USSR will be assessed, with its flourishing in the three Baltic republics being the most immediate danger for the Union. The simultaneous formation of popular fronts allowing independent ethnic mobilisation played a crucial role in exposing the crude lies of Soviet propaganda which both concealed the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact which had allowed the USSR to forcibly incorporate Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia into the Union. Other regions, in particular the tense state of the three Transcaucasian republics (including an inter-ethnic war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1988 over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh), developments in the 200 million strong Slavic heartland of the Soviet Union where *perestroika* was most keenly experienced, and the traditionally Islamic region of Central Asia which remained the least developed part of the USSR, will be analysed and assessed. Finally, the failed coup of 19-21 August 1991 will be examined in Chapter 4. The combination of the deteriorating economy and the concurrent rise of intense feelings of nationalist solidarity led to the putsch which many observers had been anticipating. Gorbachev had not fallen into the same predicament and alienation from his Politburo as Krushchev because he had always claimed to be occupying the middle ground between more radical reformers and the hardline communists. Ironically, it took the signing of a new all-Union treaty which drastically curbed the authority of the Soviet centre to finally motivate the latter to act. I will discuss how the failure of the coup led the rapid political disintegration of the USSR in December 1991 and its

replacement by fifteen successor states.

Regarding the historiography on this subject, a considerable wealth of source material has been built up since the second half of the 1980s until the present post-Soviet era. The major sources I have made use of range from Gorbachev's own publication 'New thinking for our country and the world'¹ which was published in 1987 and provides valuable insight into the early motives and the ideals which he held. Other major sources² are Brown's 'The Gorbachev Factor'² (1996) which provides a scholarly, chronological analysis of the initial enthusiasm for reform which was followed by disintegration. Brown also analyses how Gorbachev managed to retain power for so long despite the enormous pressures from left and right he faced. His work is an immensely valuable tool for assessing the new leader's motives and goals, and he also illustrates the serious decline of the Soviet Union. It is a major source for this dissertation of limited scope. Goldman³ reviews the condition of the Soviet economy in the years immediately prior to the USSR's collapse and particularly mentions contradictions in the execution of reform. He provides excellent anecdotal evidence as to why *perestroika* was not working in reality and the public's perception of this. McCauley's biographical profile of Gorbachev⁴ follows the chronology of his rise from Stavropol to his elevation to being General Secretary of the CPSU and analyses why reform failed so rapidly. Mlynar⁵ emphasises, from a reforming East European perspective, the fate of previous attempts at reform, particularly the cases of Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia(1968). An important aspect of all these sources is that they emphasise Gorbachev's slim chance of success in his reforms. They also point to the risks of failure and the danger of the revival of neo-Stalinism. All agree on the need for major structural reform for a dying economy and suffocating social and political order but that there was little prospect of a successful outcome.

¹ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika, new thinking for our country and the world* (London, Collins, 1987).

² Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev factor*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996).

³ Marshall I. Goldman, *What went wrong with perestroika*, (New York, London, W.W.Norton and company, 1991)

⁴ Martin McCauley, *Gorbachev*, (London and New York, Longman, 1998).

⁵ Zdenek Mlynar, *Can Gorbachev change the Soviet Union*, (Boulder, Westview Press, 1990).

Coleman's⁶ work sketches the influence of the KGB on the public mindset, and the problems caused by the interference of the bureaucrats in the operation of the economy and their role in retarding the success of reform. The human and natural resources in the USSR were abundant. Thus there was a vast reservoir of scientists who could have achieved major technological advances leading to the conquest of world markets, particularly were their energies to be diverted from the sophisticated field of military electronics to making consumer goods for export. This was prevented by ideology. Coleman's work is a balanced and interesting perspective on what *perestroika* might have achieved. Satter's⁷ book chronicles how glasnost dramatically altered the mindset of Soviet public opinion. The magnitude of Stalin's crimes were laid bare and his successors' continuing suppression of dissent, including abusing psychiatry for political purposes, undermined the credibility of the Party. Satter pays particular attention to the experiences of individual citizens trying, for example, to rectify injustices in a totalitarian state. Strayer⁸ provides a history of Russia and the USSR and then sketches Gorbachev's dilemma. He compares Soviet and Chinese efforts and approaches to reform and asks: "Might a more sequenced approach, delaying political change until a market economy took hold, have prevented the Soviet Union's disintegration? But without the pressure of *glasnost* and democratization, could essential reforms have been implemented at all?"⁹ The final major source is Kotkin¹⁰ who reviews the history of reform and notes the threat to the incumbent General Secretary from conservative communist hardliners. He also reviews the unhappy state of post-Soviet Russia and how it is struggling to find a dignified role in a post-Cold War world.

The general consensus of most historical scholars is that change was both essential and inevitable. The sheer scope of the task Gorbachev set himself and the evolution of these structural deficiencies over decades stood against any realistic chance of success for *perestroika*. It was only Gorbachev's skill as a

⁶ Fred Coleman, *The decline and fall of the Soviet Union*, (New York, St.Martin's Press, 1996).

⁷ David Satter, *Age of delirium*, (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

⁸ Robert Strayer, *Why did the Soviet Union collapse?*, (New York, London, M.E.Sharpe, 1998).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.121.

master politician which allowed him to remain at the helm for so long. Whilst the Soviet Union did possess certain achievements, such as universal health care and widespread access to education, most sources argue that the stifling of all democratic debate, the omnipresent secret police and persecution of dissidents outweigh any positive features of developed socialism.

¹⁰ Stephen Kotkin, Armageddon averted, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001).

CHAPTER 1

The background to decline.

1.1 The struggling Soviet economy and Gorbachev: the background

Gorbachev, on assuming the leadership of the Soviet Union, was immediately perceived by Western Sovietologists to be a man very much in the mould of Yuri Andropov. He had been a recent predecessor of Gorbachev and had headed the much feared omnipresent security service, the KGB. In this capacity, Andropov had gained important insights into the serious problems facing the Soviet economy and had indicated to the USSR's establishment that drastic reform of it would be the highest priority. He made his intentions clear by his demands for labour discipline and his attempts to take measures against the widespread alcoholism in the work force. Andropov died prematurely in February 1984. His reforms were, however, a precursor of the far more comprehensive structural and social reforms of Gorbachev, after his elevation to the leadership in March 1985.

The question must be posed as to why the Soviet economy was in such dire need of reform that even a convinced neo-Stalinist such as Andropov realised that drastic measures to rescue the situation had to be taken. Gorbachev inherited an economic structure which, to the maximum extent possible, ignored fundamental market realities which Western free market economies took for granted. The USSR also, according to Kotkin¹, spent between twenty to thirty percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on maintaining its superpower status, a figure which could only be achieved by reducing its consumer spending and depriving ordinary citizens of an adequate supply of such commodities. Whilst Lenin had been the political founder of the Soviet state and had been the chief ideological architect of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 - he had even staged a

¹ S.Kotkin, Armageddon averted, p.61.

strategic retreat to capitalist economic principles (his New Economic Policy or NEP) to reinvigorate economic activity, particularly in the vast rural areas of the new state - his successor Stalin had laid down the intricate framework of the command economy. This variant of communist economics emphasised the central planning of all economic activity and its most pervasive characteristic had been the rapid construction of a massive capital goods industry from scratch during the 1930s. The first five year plan, begun on 1 October 1928, was fulfilled in four years. Some of the results achieved were impressive. McCauley writes: "Great new industrial centres in the Urals, Kuzbass and the Volga took shape and the traditional areas such as Leningrad, Moscow and the Donbass also expanded."² He supplies other impressive statistics: "Electricity output by 1932 had almost trebled since 1928, hard coal and oil had almost doubled. So energy was a great success although no branch actually fulfilled its plan. Steel output however was disappointing. Production only climbed from 4 million tonnes in 1927-28 to 5.9 million tonnes in 1932; pig iron, on the other hand, jumped from 3.3 million tonnes to 6.2 million tonnes in 1932."³ This development had been achieved at an enormous cost, particularly when measured in sheer human terms, but the Soviet dictator had conceived it as absolutely essential for the infant revolutionary state to survive in an immensely hostile world. Indeed, it had been pivotal in providing the USSR with the heavy weaponry needed to resist and repel the onslaught of Nazi Germany and had been fundamental to the Allied victory in the Second World War. One of its most negative aspects had been the immensely brutal collectivisation of agriculture in which millions of the lives of the most productive peasants (the so-called kulaks or rich peasants) had been deliberately destroyed. The Ukraine suffered in particular with an artificially induced famine decimating the rural population. David Satter describes in moving detail this brutality and quotes from a book by Volodymyr Manyak and Lidia Kovalenko: "What happened in 1933"⁴, said Manyak, "exceeded all the dark dreams of the hangmen of the world. The perpetrators had high positions in the Communist system and turned

² Martin McCauley, The Soviet Union 1917-1991, (Longman, London, 1993), pp.80,81.

³ Ibid., p.81.

⁴ Satter, Age of delirium, p.370.

their punishing sword on their own people. In the earth lie 9 million of our people.”⁵ Victory in the war had greatly entrenched the system of the command economy and its scope of operation had been extended to many of the now subject nations of Eastern Europe by the occupation by the Red Army in 1945. This new “outer empire” which the Soviet Union had acquired was most notable in its duplication of the Soviet model of economic organisation. It was bound together in Comecon as a single socialist economic zone and it was to survive more than four decades until its collapse in 1989 due to Gorbachev’s reform policy.

Within the “inner empire” of the Soviet Union itself, all of Stalin’s successors - the dictator died in 1953- were confronted with his legacy, a reality which embraced the entire social, economic and political structure of this vast domain. A trade mark of his era had been the widespread use of terror against all his opponents, and millions even of loyal communists had either been executed or perished in Soviet labour camps in the frozen Arctic wastes of the north. Thus, it is to the considerable credit of Nikita Krushchev, his successor in the Kremlin, that he both ended this policy and even had the courage to denounce Stalin as a mass murderer to a stunned 1956 Congress of the Communist Party. Krushchev had been a beneficiary of the rapid promotion in the Party due to the terror but he also emerged as its first major reformer. He was acutely conscious of the enormous dangers and inherent risks in reform and renunciation of the elaborate personality cult of Stalin. He tended to concentrate, therefore, on economic reform and strengthening the USSR’s international prestige. He engaged in what Pearson refers to as “daring new projects like the initially spectacular if ultimately flawed ‘Virgin lands scheme’ in Central Asia”⁶ which aimed at turning vast tracts of desert into irrigated farmland. The author remarks: “Espousing causes which portrayed him as an authentic ‘man of the people’, Krushchev sought out photo opportunities in which he unblushingly appeared as a proletarian among proletarians one day and a peasant among peasants the next.”⁷ His rule also co-incided with the Soviet Union’s most prestigious scientific achievement, the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ R. Pearson, The rise and fall of the Soviet empire, (St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1998), p.49.

⁷ Ibid.

launching of the first manned space flight in 1959. Besides this, the Soviet grip on the nations of Eastern Europe was tightened. Strayer alludes to certain positive features of the Krushchev reforms such as “housing, long neglected in the Stalin years, almost doubled during Krushchev’s decade in power. And, by relying increasingly on nuclear weapons, he tried to reduce military spending on more expensive conventional forces.”⁸

McCauley identifies some interesting data on the Soviet economy during the period 1951-65. Whilst population growth remained constant at 1.4 per cent, Gross National Product growth averaged 5.9 per cent between 1956-60, and decreased to 5 per cent between 1962-65. Crucially, growth in industrial output declined from 8.3 per cent between 1956-60 to 6.6 per cent during 1961-65. The worst performer was agriculture which reflected figures of 4.2 per cent growth in the former period, declining to 2.8 per cent between 1961-65.⁹ Thus, the heady years of the 1930s were now a distant memory and economic reality was setting in. Krushchev’s successors were going to realise this even more in the coming decades.

Perhaps being a foreshadow of what was to come during the latter half of the 1980s, Krushchev attempted to clip the wings of the hugely bloated economic bureaucracy. Even in the 1950s he was aware that “the chief problem, in his view, was the enormous power of those ministries responsible for various branches of the economy”.¹⁰ W.J.Tompson makes an interesting comparison between Krushchev and Gorbachev as reformers: “Reformist policies involve an attempt to rescue essential values (in terms of regime survival or goals) by sacrificing inessential ones.”¹¹ Krushchev’s attempts to rescue the essence of socialism was, in a sense, easier because of the nature of the post Second World War environment within which he was operating. The first three decades following the war, until the oil crisis of 1973, were a period of continual economic prosperity

⁸ R. Strayer, Why did the Soviet Union collapse?, p.49.

⁹ M.McCauley, The Soviet Union 1917-91, p.251.

¹⁰ R.Strayer, Why did the Soviet Union collapse?, p.49.

¹¹ W.J.Tompson, ‘Krushchev and Gorbachev as reformers: A comparison’, British Journal of Political Science, vol.23, no.1, 1993, p.79.

and the period of relative peace for the Soviet Union enabled it to focus on economic goals. Certain significant factors coalesced. The enormous investment in heavy industry during the 1930s had laid a foundation for increasing the quantities of industrial production (as indicated earlier), there was a large pool of manpower from demobilised soldiers entering formal employment and there was an important benefit to the rebuilding effort in the Soviet Union from reparations from East Germany especially. Certainly, economic efficiency was not a serious factor, a real dilemma which the empire would soon face. Gorbachev was confronted with an entirely different set of circumstances. An entire generation had grown up without personal experience of the sacrifices and horrors of war and had been promised a huge improvement in their living standards by Soviet propaganda. These promises, however, were not fulfilled, which was an important factor in the dissident movement which sprang up during the Brezhnev years. Many Soviet citizens were aware that there was an enormous gulf which separated their country from the developed Western nations. Tompson observes: "By 1985, falling rates of growth and the accumulating evidence of economic (and consequently social) stagnation had left it in tatters: this enormous stagnation also undermined the Soviet Union's ability to support its foreign and defence policies."¹² Thus, Krushchev had intervened in Hungary by crushing the first major insurrection against communist rule. Gorbachev, on the other hand, could not have acted similarly even had he so desired as the consequent economic fallout and international opprobrium which would have ensued would have shattered his *bona fides* as a reformer. Vital funds and the desperately needed foreign investment required by *perestroika* would not have been forthcoming from the West.

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the Stalin era was the brutal crushing of dissent. Whilst Krushchev had managed to put an end to terror as a political instrument and even permitted a somewhat brave thaw when critical literary works such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich* could be published, all organised opposition to rule by the communists was relentlessly crushed. Particularly once the thaw was over, all the features and

¹² Ibid., p.83

trappings of totalitarianism reasserted themselves. Widespread censorship of books, plays and even poetry were routine features of life in the USSR. No alternative account to the orthodox communist version of history was permitted. All academic disciplines, including the natural sciences, had to pay homage to Marxism-Leninism as the final answer to the scientific organisation of social, economic and political life. The Party line was slavishly followed by all the media, including the press, radio and television. This obsession which allowed even an absurd construction of reality - for example refusing to allow reporting on any news which might dent the illusion of the Soviet Union as a workers' paradise - was regarded by the authorities as normal. Because the USSR was a paradise, it was not a surprise that all news of economic problems remained a closely guarded secret.

1.2 The Soviet Union under Brezhnev: 1964-82.

Leonid Brezhnev ousted Nikita Krushchev in a Party - inspired coup in 1964. The reasons behind this are summed up by McCauley: "The long journey of the Soviet Union through revolution, war, civil war, the semi-bourgeois era of NEP, crash industrialisation and enforced collectivisation, the savage war of 1941-45, the harsh post-war years, the unending industrial and agricultural experimentation of the Krushchev years, led those who survived to long for consolidation, calm, certainty, stability and a minimum of innovation. The moment was ripe for a careful consensus-seeking bureaucrat to lead the USSR. The man most suited by temperament and political instinct turned out to be Leonid Ilich Brezhnev."¹³ A brief review of his period at the summit of the Soviet leadership clearly illustrates the downward trend of the economy. The Soviet figures for economic output during the eighth Five Year Plan (FYP), from 1966-70, were optimistic as they indicated that there was an increase of 41 per cent in national income and that

¹³ M.McCauley, The Soviet Union 1917-1991, p.286.

industrial output was up 50 per cent.¹⁴ The figures for agriculture were more worrying as they suggested that this branch of the economy had still failed to respond to the massive investments it had been allocated.

The ninth FYP (1971-75), however, revealed that the increase in economic growth was shortlived. National income only grew 28 per cent instead of the planned 38.6 per cent. Again, the major culprit remained agriculture which grew only 13 per cent instead of the desired 23 per cent.¹⁵ Poor harvests in 1972 and 1975 were blamed and the USSR became a major importer of American grain. McCauley observes that the population of the empire increased by 5 per cent during 1971-75 and "if investment going into branches supplying agriculture, machinery, fertilisers and so on is added then about one rouble in three was being invested in the agricultural sector in the second half of the 1970s".¹⁶

However, positive factors in the international arena came to assert themselves. The Soviet Union received a huge windfall in receipts from the dramatic escalation in oil prices in 1973 and again in 1979. Kotkin sketches the magnitude of these developments: "From 1973 to 1985, energy exports accounted for 80 per cent of the USSR's expanding hard currency earnings. Other oil exporting countries - top customers for Soviet weapons - saw their oil revenues increase from 23 billion dollars in 1972 to 140 billion dollars in 1977."¹⁷ The receipts from all this hard currency flooding into an economy which was exhibiting serious indications of struggling to grow, even at a much lower rate, was largely wasted. The satellite regimes of Eastern Europe were propped up, a huge military buildup entrenched the USSR's status as a rival superpower to the United States, the war in Afghanistan was subsidised, and the Soviet elite, including the bureaucracy, were given increased perks and, according to Kotkin, "oil financed the acquisition of Western technology for making cars, synthetic fibres, and other products for consumers, as well as Western feed for Soviet livestock".¹⁸ But it would have been better utilised had it been employed to promote the structural

¹⁴ Ibid., p.294.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.295.

¹⁷ S.Kotkin, *Armageddon averted*, p. 15.

reform so urgently needed - including dealing with what the author calls the empire's "rust belt"¹⁹ - a reality that Western steel firms had had to deal with by drastically improving productivity and reducing both output and employee numbers in the 1970s.

1.3. External commitments and the internal economic decline of the Soviet superpower.

The problem with the Kremlin's superpower status in the context of foreign relations was that, while facing Nato in the west and China on its southern border, the USSR was too strategically stretched. This was to be particularly evident when the political and economic implosion resulting from Gorbachev's reforms began very rapidly to undermine the capacity of the Soviet Union to respond and even consider intervening. The burdens of empire in Eastern Europe, whose people were growing more restive every year (the example of the Solidarity free trade union in Poland in the late 1970s illustrates this), as well as the maintenance of an over ambitious foreign policy were causing a great strain on the limited economic resources of the Soviet Union. Thus, the propping up of client socialist states in the Third World, particularly in Africa, came increasingly to drain the Soviet treasury of resources which could more wisely have been spent domestically.

Thus, the acquisition of superpower status by the Soviet Union became something of a two-edged sword for both the USSR's leaders and citizens. It was a cause for pride and a millstone around the Union's neck. There can be little doubt that this strategic overstretch, dictated by both communist ideology and Russian nationalistic ambitions which can even be traced back to Tsarist times, multiplied the difficulties of a reformer such as Gorbachev. There remained the unresolved Afghan conflict which was proving to be an unpopular quagmire for the leaders, having been inherited from Brezhnev who dispatched one hundred

¹⁸ Ibid., p.16.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.17

thousand Soviet troops to Afghanistan to prop up an unpopular communist government on Christmas day, 1979. The fact is that the Soviet economy had, during Brezhnev's leadership (1964-82), finally come to stagnate, as indicated earlier, despite being able to continue functioning due to the massive increase in crude oil prices in the 1970s. It also meant that the capacity of the Soviet Union to maintain the arms race and rivalry with the West, particularly the United States with its far larger economy, became too onerous to be sustained any longer.

Thus the decision by Gorbachev to abandon class struggle as the major guiding principle in conducting international relations was essentially a response to this reality. The overt military support for revolution in the Third World was no longer seen as making any strategic sense to the new reform leaders in the Kremlin. This decision had its most immediate ramifications in the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe and took even the most optimistic Western observers by surprise. Thus, all these nations were allowed to go their own way. Most managed to peacefully remove Communist rulers, despite the existence of tension and uncertainty. The only exception was Rumania and, in addition and crucially, the post-war division of Germany came to an end. Gorbachev had calculated that the gratitude which the West would accord him would translate into tangible economic benefits for *perestroika*. The new Soviet leader also demonstrated a considerable disdain for the use of violence as a political weapon and this was to continue as a feature of his term as General Secretary of the CPSU. Besides this, the decision by President Reagan to escalate the arms race and promote his 'Star Wars' initiative was a threat to which the faltering Soviet economy could not respond. McCauley illustrates in what a dire state it was: "The official view was that Soviet national income was about 64 per cent of the US level in 1988. Gorbachev, in a speech in October 1990, implied that the real figure was about 40 per cent."²⁰ This factor is reflected in the stagnant GNP figures during 1985-89.²¹ The arrival of inflation as an endemic feature of the last years of the Soviet Union's existence was directly related to loss of the money supply, whose blame must fall on Gorbachev. The

²⁰ McCauley, *The Soviet Union*, p.366.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.365.

budget deficit soared from a traditional 2 or 3 per cent of GNP to 10 per cent in 1988.²²

Gorbachev, in his own writing on *perestroika*²³ even tries to defend the achievements of the command economy. He, perhaps correctly, assesses the international realities of the late 1920s and entire 1930s. "In effect, we had to build up industry, especially heavy industry and the power and machine-building industries from scratch. And we set out boldly to accomplish this task. The viability of the Party's plans which the masses understood and accepted, and of the slogans and projects permeated with the ideological energy of our revolution manifested itself in the enthusiasm with which millions of Soviet people joined in the efforts to build up national industry."²⁴ The new Soviet leader had hoped he could fire up the entire Soviet Union with a radically different vision of how to make socialism work. This can, in retrospect, be regarded as naïve as the masses had long since come to regard socialism and the CPSU leadership with the utmost cynicism. He also paid attention to the reforms which had previously taken place in certain nations in the Soviet bloc, such as Hungary where a flourishing but limited private sector had been allowed to exist after the 1956 uprising as long as no attempt was made to escape the confines of the Warsaw Pact. Also, the experiment in democratic reform in Czechoslovakia was now viewed as a positive move toward a more democratic socialism than presently existed in the USSR.

Gorbachev assessed the situation which had now come to confront the Soviet Union and made, to his mind, *perestroika* indispensable. He writes in 1987: "Analyzing the situation we first discovered a slowing economic growth. In the last fifteen years the national income growth rates had declined by more than a half and by the beginning of the eighties had fallen to a level close to economic stagnation. A country that was quickly closing on the world's advanced nations began to lose one position after another."²⁵ Thus the ideological challenge to the capitalist world of socialism in its Soviet form was faltering badly. Khrushchev's

²² Ibid.

²³ Gorbachev, *Perestroika, new thinking for our country and the world*, p.39.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p.19.

crude boast in the late 1950s that the socialist system would bury capitalism was now absurd, especially in view of the Soviet Union's stagnant economy.

Accentuating Gorbachev's predicament, Kotkin indicates how a dramatic fall in world oil prices by 69 per cent had a disastrous effect on the Union.²⁶ Gorbachev argued on how a preoccupation with producing enormous quantities of particular goods, especially the commodities emanating from heavy industry, had not only been fruitless but actually detrimental to the Soviet Union's already weak competitive position. He describes how "the worker or enterprise that had expended the greatest amount of labour, material and money was considered the best".²⁷ The loser, he conceded, was the consumer.

Excessive investments had been placed into sectors such as raw materials, energy and other resources with very little to show for it. Gorbachev asserts that "our country's wealth in terms of natural and manpower resources has spoilt, one may even say corrupted us. That, in fact, is chiefly the reason why it was possible for our economy to develop extensively for decades."²⁸ Kotkin indicates just how much it was endowed with natural resources. By the 1970s, "the USSR had risen to become the world's largest producer of oil and natural gas, and the third largest of coal, but it nonetheless suffered chronic energy shortages - what the leading expert called a 'crisis amid plenty'."²⁹

Clearly, Gorbachev understood that, in the final decades of the twentieth century military power - including a vast stockpile of nuclear weapons - counted for relatively little. The contradiction with, for example Japan and the "tiger" economies of East Asia was very evident to him. Far more prestige was granted to those nations who exported hi-tech goods, particularly in the IT industry. Besides the USSR's relatively underdeveloped consumer industry, the ossified command economy produced countless economic distortions. Gorbachev writes: "An absurd situation was developing. The Soviet Union, the world's biggest producer of steel, raw materials, fuel and energy, has shortfalls in them due to wasteful or inefficient

²⁶ Kotkin, *Armageddon averted*, p.16.

²⁷ Gorbachev, *Perestroika, new thinking for our country and the world*, p.19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.19,20.

²⁹ Kotkin, *Armageddon averted*, p.16.

use. One of the biggest producers of grain for food, it nevertheless has to buy millions of tons of grain a year for fodder.”³⁰ Certain Soviet achievements, particularly in the aeronautic and space industry, had stunned the world, but living conditions for most ordinary Soviet citizens were cramped and spartan. Agricultural and other consumer goods provided by the so-called developed socialism were either frequently unavailable or were of notably inferior quality.

1.4. The security organs, the suppression of dissidents and the bureaucracy.

The tendency to secrecy and repression became even more manifest with the overthrow of Krushchev in a Party leadership coup in 1964. His replacement by Brezhnev resulted in an even more vigorous crackdown on dissent. Whilst he did not return to Stalin’s rule by terror he nevertheless cracked down hard on any dissidents who began to be more organised - their practice of publishing *samizdat* (or self-published) literature being a prime manifestation of this development. The KGB was the major instrument of Soviet rulers in maintaining their absolute control over society and culture. Kotkin quotes a former deputy chairman of this security agency, Filipp Bobkov, as asserting that “the KGB was a repressive, not an educational organ”.³¹ He continues: “Many people collaborated with the authorities’ requests without much pressure, and more than a few came forward on their own.”³² The KGB saw its major function as eradicating all signs of dissent and did not hesitate to use every possible weapon at its disposal to fulfil it. The Party’s complete control over society was sacrosanct. The creation of the mythical Homo Sovieticus was its supreme goal. There existed, not surprisingly, within Soviet society a climate of fear and intimidation by and of the KGB and it was an effective tool for most ordinary citizens who, had they dissented, feared for their employment, families and the very real threat of losing everything. The use of imprisonment on charges of

³⁰ Gorbachev, *Perestroika, new thinking for our country and the world*, p.21.

³¹ Kotkin, *Armageddon averted*, p.45.

³² *Ibid.*

anti-Soviet agitation, the scandalous abuse of psychiatry to intern sane individuals and subject them to horrendous treatment with certain drugs - this tactic broke down many people who would normally have withstood persecution - were perhaps the KGB's chief weapons to maintain rigid control. Kotkin again writes: "The KGB, like the western media, was obsessed over manifestations of what it regarded as non-conformist behaviour. But of the several thousand individuals jailed or exiled for unorthodox views or actions during the Brezhnev years, only a small minority consisted of internationally recognised human-rights campaigners such as the physicist Andrei Sakharov."³³

It is within this legacy of totalitarian control and despite its relentless intensity that Gorbachev launched *glasnost* or openness. This new policy was conceived as essential if the Soviet economy was to be rescued from its terminal decline to collapse and, ultimately, to be a relic of twentieth century history. The new General Secretary was keenly aware that there were considerable advantages in encouraging public criticism of an ossified, unpopular bureaucracy which had come to regard the masses with disdain and whose officials were intent on keeping their privileges. *Glasnost* also exposed certain uncomfortable realities of just what everyday life in the Soviet Union had been and still remained. "Direct access to life in the West was granted only to select members of the Soviet upper ranks. No less restricted was access to the lives of those higher strata. Elite hospitals, resorts, supply networks and schools were closed affairs."³⁴ He continues, observing that "Russia's socialist revolution, having originated in a radical quest for egalitarianism, produced an insulated privileged class increasingly preoccupied with the spoils of office for themselves and their children. The existence of a vast and self-indulgent elite was the greatest contradiction in the post-war Soviet Union, and the most volatile."³⁵

David Satter writes of the deeply felt dilemma facing the ordinary Soviet citizen. Those citizens who felt cheated by the authorities sometimes took their complaints to Moscow in person in a vain attempt to obtain redress. They were

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., p.48.

³⁵ Ibid.

termed truth seekers, by Moscow residents, a term employed by Satter. The author observes that “when a complainant leaves a provincial city to seek truth in Moscow, he is taking a path littered with the discarded hopes of thousands of truth seekers before him.”³⁶ Their treatment by an uncaring bureaucracy involved being directed from one reception hall to another and being required to fill out a multitude of detailed forms. They, however, still maintained a naïve belief in the prospects for redress of their grievances. Satter declares that “they are the firmest believers in the justice of the Soviet system, which actually has no place for them.”³⁷ The general cynicism of the *apparat* was, however, increasingly made evident by *glasnost* and considerable hopes were aroused that at least some change was possible. In time, *glasnost* could only serve to undermine faith in a system whose economy failed to even provide adequately for its citizens and where the apparent universal truths of building a classless society, as conceived by Marx and Lenin, were openly mocked by officialdom and their leaders. Strayer refers to the existence of a second economy, particularly during the Brezhnev years. This enabled the masses to acquire scarce consumer goods which were not available in the state sector.³⁸ He remarks on its effect: “But the price was rampant official corruption. The multiple payoffs, favors and personal connections among economic managers, some elements of the party apparatus, and large-scale operators in the second economy gave rise to the ‘mafias’ that entrenched themselves first in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan and later throughout the country.”³⁹ Strayer does assert that “accurate figures are impossible to obtain.”⁴⁰ The realisation was to dawn on most Soviet people that so-called bourgeois criticism from the West was actually often correct and that a vigorous open debate actually uncovered the sad reality of their lives. Thus, the allegations that there remained thousands of political prisoners even in the 1980s, that much cruelty was meted out to them, and that the abuse of psychiatry on a routine basis was indeed

³⁶ Satter, *Age of delirium*, p.91.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.92

³⁸ Strayer, *Why did the Soviet Union collapse?*, p.67.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

true and not merely Western propaganda, greatly shook any remaining faith in communism among the masses.

1.5. The multi-national character of the Soviet Union.

Besides the Soviet Union's "outer empire" in Eastern Europe, there remained the "inner empire" which included the fifteen constituent republics of the USSR and countless smaller nationalities, such as Chechens and Crimean Tartars. This heterogeneous character of the Soviet state proved to be an essential structural weakness and scarcely disguised the reality that the Communist Party had merely constructed the world's first socialist state on the legacy of the Tsarist empire. Much propaganda concerning the fraternal brotherhood of the various nations of the USSR could not conceal that the Russians were the dominant nationality or *primus inter pares*. Of the estimated 286 million Soviet citizens, scarcely more than half that total, 145 million, in 1989⁴¹ were ethnic Russians. Thus, its demographic significance was not overwhelming and, added to this factor, was the fact that these Russians were extremely thinly spread in such a vast geographic region which encompassed one sixth of the land mass of the planet.

When ethnic Slavs were encouraged by the Soviet leadership, particularly by Stalin, Krushchev and Brezhnev, to migrate to regions such as Central Asia, Siberia and the Baltic, this only aggravated matters. McCauley remarks: "The concept of the 'Soviet people' was officially promoted from the early 1970s."⁴² He continues: "Russians continued to take precedence among the nations of the Soviet Union. Brezhnev lauded the 'revolutionary energy, diligence and deep internationalism of the great Russian people' which had earned them the 'sincere respect of the peoples' of the USSR."⁴³ The reason for this internal migration was to ostensibly promote economic advancement, particularly industrialisation, but most indigenous nationalities perceived it as an act of colonisation, with the real

⁴¹ McCauley, The Soviet Union 1917-1991, p.306.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.307.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

aim being to tie them closer to Moscow. Therefore, the other potentially major flaw in the structure of the USSR was its multi-national character. Besides the numerically dominant Russians there were two other Slavic peoples, the Ukrainians and Byelorussians. Ukraine had an estimated population of 44 million and Byelorussia had 10 million in 1989.⁴⁴ Their demographic weight alone meant their aspirations could not be permanently ignored. This factor was also reinforced by their high level of cultural development. Many Slavophile propagandists were very keen to include these nations within the framework of a greater Russia as they had long shared a common history and culture. Stalin had caused the deaths of millions of Ukrainians during collectivisation- there had been a deliberate man-made famine, and the dictator had viewed them as collaborators with the invading Germans during the 1940s. Their sheer numbers protected them from the fate meted out to smaller groups such as the Crimean Tartars or Volga Germans who had suffered a brutal deportation to Central Asia. Ukraine possessed a nationalistic western section close to the border with Poland, which included a number of Eastern-rite Catholics, and a more industrialised east which included approximately 11 million ethnic Russians. This latter population was, not surprisingly, more content to remain in the USSR. Once Gorbachev introduced *glasnost* as official policy, nationalist tendencies emerged and even led to the founding of *Rukh*, the Ukraine's popular front. Independence was not viewed as a realistic aspiration, however.

The two most troublesome regions within the Union were the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), and the nations of the Transcaucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia). The former three states had, between the two World Wars, been independent but had been consigned to the Soviet Union by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939. Stalin had invaded and annexed them immediately and granted them the status of republics within the USSR. These three Baltic nations chafed under the Soviet yoke and had powerful memories of an independence so brutally snatched from them. They constituted the most western-oriented region of the Union and perceived themselves to be more a part of Europe

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.306.

than of Russia. Whilst Stalin's successors had allowed benign manifestations of national pride, particularly in the cultural arena, it is perhaps not surprising that the advent of *glasnost* would revive the demand for a restoration of independence.

In the Transcaucasus, Armenia and Georgia were both ancient Christian nations while Azerbaijan was Islamic. All three republics had developed a reputation for corruption, as previously alluded to, particularly in the Brezhnev era. There was a major dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan dating back to early Soviet days over the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, which lay within the borders of the Azerbaijan republic. It had been, in the early 1920s, decided to award control of the enclave to the Azeris. This ruling had never been accepted by Armenia. The dispute arising out of the resurfacing of this quarrel became a major crisis for Gorbachev. The third republic, Georgia, remained fiercely committed to its language and culture despite overt attempts at Russification by the authorities. Strayer points to the 1978 decision by the Party to abolish Georgian as the official language of the republic in favour of Russian. The consequence was that it "provoked such a widespread outcry that authorities were forced to back down on the issue."⁴⁵ But the events were restricted to the relatively narrow field of language and culture. The possibility of independence was seldom considered as a realistic aspiration.

The other major region of the USSR was Central Asia. It was traditionally Islamic and nomadic in character. Here, tribal and clan loyalties counted most and it was the most backward region with by far the highest birth rate. An example of this is Tadzhikistan where the percentage increase in population was 35.7 in 1970-79 compared with a mere 6.5 per cent among Russians.⁴⁶ It also could be viewed as being stuck in a colonial relationship with the Slavic core of the empire and its economy was based heavily on cotton cultivation for the wider USSR. Also, the region had witnessed the influx of several million Russian settlers whose function had been to modernise such a backward region and they were settled chiefly in the urban centres.

⁴⁵ Strayer, Why did the Soviet Union collapse?, p.76.

⁴⁶ McCauley, The Soviet Union 1917-1991, p.306.

Strayer accurately summarises the nationality problem prior to the advent of Gorbachev. He writes: "Thus, the Soviet Union endured, its political stability not seriously threatened by nationalist upheaval."⁴⁷ He remarks on the provision of educational advancement for backward peoples in a country or empire industrialising, albeit at a snail's pace. The leadership's authority would have been reinforced by the "constant propaganda by the regime and few alternative sources of information."⁴⁸ But, he concludes: "But beneath the placid surface, the slow transformation of cultural identity and political identity proceeded apace, driven in large measure by the policies and practices of the Soviet regime itself."⁴⁹ Reform was to greatly accelerate these processes and bring the inherent contradictions of Soviet political and economic life to the fore.

1.6. A brief biographical portrayal of Gorbachev.

Mikhail Sergeyeovich Gorbachev was born in the village of Privolnoye in the rural region of Stavropol in southern Russia in 1931. His family was of peasant origins but both his father and grandfather were party members and, as a young man he had been very active in the party's youth wing, the *Komsomol*. By the age of eighteen he had become a candidate member of the CPSU itself, and he proceeded to study law at Moscow State University. His decision to make a career in the Party in 1955, on returning to Stavropol, was to govern his life for 36 years, and by 1970, he had risen to being first secretary in the provincial party bureaucracy. He was transferred to Moscow in 1978, being appointed to the party secretariat with responsibility for agriculture. In 1980 he became a full member of the party's Politburo and, at the age of 49 years, he was the youngest. The deaths in office of the gerontocracy who had headed the CPSU propelled him to being General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985, at a relatively young age of 54.

Coleman observes that "like everyone else who grew up in Stalin's Russia, Gorbachev learned very early to keep his innermost thoughts to himself".⁵⁰ He

⁴⁷ Strayer. Why did the Soviet Union collapse?, p.79.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

enthusiastically supported the Stalinist line of the period but clearly was not blind to the tragic consequences of the terror. He resolved to work within the party “where all the power lay, rather than to tilt uselessly at windmills outside it”.⁵¹ Strayer observes that “his early career co-incided with the Krushchev thaw and marked his break with Stalinism and his political identification with the moderate, reformist wing of the party”.⁵²

Once securely ensconced in Moscow in 1978 he had been exposed to see “the party’s leadership in its most decrepit, unimaginative, and incompetent phase, particularly during Brezhnev’s last years”.⁵³ The brief tenure of Chernenko (1984-85) only confirmed what a fellow reformer agreed: “everything is rotten”⁵⁴ and also “its no longer possible to live this way”.⁵⁵ Only Andropov’s brief period in power(1982-84) “provided Gorbachev with a more positive model for many of his own early reforms”.⁵⁶ These included worker indiscipline, anticorruption drives, and a crackdown on alcoholism.

Clearly, little in Gorbachev’s background would have prepared him for steering the Soviet Union on a path which was to lead to credible experiments in democracy and the abandonment of socialism in favour of the market. He became the most significant figure of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

⁵⁰ Coleman, *The decline and fall of the Soviet empire*, p.218.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Strayer, *Why did the Soviet Union collapse?*, p.90.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.90,91.

CHAPTER 2

Glasnost and the disintegration of the Soviet state

2.1 *Glasnost* and political change

The significance of *glasnost* in relation to the emergence of criticism of Soviet politics and society cannot be over-estimated. The endemic corruption of the Brezhnev years had also been accompanied by the constant crushing of all forms of dissent with dissidents of all shades of ideological opinion being routinely harassed, imprisoned, exiled and even confined to psychiatric institutions. Any belief among the working people of the Soviet Union in Marxism-Leninism had long since dissipated and it is not an exaggeration to say that the whole system enjoyed little legitimacy among the masses.

Realising what he had inherited Gorbachev aimed at revitalising and reenergising Soviet society and it was thus that he announced to his people and the Soviet hierarchy that he was introducing a policy of *glasnost*, which means openness. Whilst there was considerable skepticism among observers at the time it soon became apparent that a significant shift in the political dynamics of the USSR was taking place. The encouragement to the press to openly criticise the dysfunctional elements in Soviet society and its economy was a startling move away from previous practices. What was the legacy which Gorbachev had inherited from his predecessors and, more particularly, how could he tackle the ghost of Stalin who had dictated both the nature of the Soviet command economy and the construction of a 'totalitarian' political system and the society which it produced? The ideology of Marxism-Leninism supplied the rationalisation for the suspension of even the most elementary of civil liberties, giving rise to a climate of rampant fear of the authorities. Since the Communist Party allowed no alternative party to function, an unreal world of lies developed in which only the ritualistic praising of Soviet achievements (in science in particular, but also in

practically all fields of human endeavour) was permitted to exist. The scornful denunciation of Western capitalist societies was the norm and any self-criticism of Soviet society and economy was crushed by the unrelenting propaganda machine of the Party.

The effect of this world of self-delusion could not be concealed permanently in the economic arena. Gorbachev's immediate predecessors (particularly Leonid Brezhnev) were content to allow the economy to tick over but by the late 1970s and early 1980s the signs of the terminal decline of the Soviet economy were plain for all serious observers, both Western and Soviet, to note. Political repression would not resuscitate the empire of the Soviet Union and Gorbachev decided, at first tentatively, to attempt to harness the energies of the long-suffering masses through greater openness and democracy, to gain a better life for his people.

No incident more thoroughly indicated the intent of the new leadership to be more honest and informative to its citizens than the official handling of what became known as the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster in April 1986. Archie Brown observes that "in a paradoxical way, the disastrous accident was a stimulus to the further development of *glasnost*. The paradox lay in the fact that the initial Soviet reaction was a complete negation of *glasnost* and an apparent return to the bad old ways."¹ Whilst the accident occurred on 26 April 1986 it was only two days later that it was publicly confirmed on Soviet television. The fact that radioactive fallout had spread over Western Europe and Scandinavia meant that no attempt at sweeping the matter under the carpet could succeed. Brown analyses the subsequent response and comments that "the bolder Soviet journalists drew lessons from the catalogue of irresponsibility the Chernobyl disaster embodied".² In 1991 Gorbachev was to observe that "this event shook us immensely and agreed that it was a turning point in terms of the development of greater openness".³

¹ Brown, The Gorbachev Factor, p. 163.

² *Ibid.*, p. 163.

³ *Ibid.*

Brian McNair comments on how the struggle between the proponents of greater openness and those who demanded a reversion to the old responses occurred. "Gorbachev and Vorotnikov are said to have been in the minority in advocating a more open approach to the tragedy.... The majority favoured a news blackout."⁴ By 6 May the supporters of *glasnost* had prevailed. The significance of the Chernobyl disaster cannot be overemphasised. McNair quotes Soviet sociologist Boris Kagarlitsky as asserting that, after Chernobyl "*glasnost* began to change from an official slogan into an everyday practice."⁵ Its impact went far and wide. He writes that "the truth about Chernobyl which eventually hit the newspapers opened the way to a more truthful examination of other social problems".⁶

Glasnost could not have been implemented without the thoroughgoing reforms which took place at the top echelons of the Soviet Communist Party and the transformation of the leadership. John Miller remarks on the drastic nature of the changes. "By the time of the XXVII Party congress in February, 1986 about 40 per cent of the most senior jobs in the country had changed hands."⁷ The implications of this for *glasnost* were dramatic, with deleted or suppressed events in the Soviet past being publicly revealed and discussed. Thus the Stalin years were reassessed by journals and periodicals and even the very nature of what constituted Soviet socialism and the command economy were open for discussion.

Yet another effect of the Chernobyl catastrophe was evident in the actions taken by prominent reformer and major architect of *glasnost*, Alexander Yakovlev, to overhaul "some parts of the media"⁸. Thus, major newspapers, inter alia *Izvestiya* and *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, were given new editors and no longer served merely as the mouthpieces of official propaganda.

The overt wooing of the country's intelligentsia was viewed as crucial in reforming Soviet socialism. This was graphically illustrated when Gorbachev

⁴ Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet media*, (London and New York, Routledge, 1991), p.66.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John Miller, *Mikhail Gorbachev and the end of Soviet power*, (London, MacMillan Press Ltd., 1993) p.41.

phoned Andrei Sakharov, the USSR's most prominent dissident, on 16 December 1986, and invited him to return to Moscow from his forced exile in Gorky. Gorbachev's sincerity as a reformer of the Soviet economy and society was no longer doubted by analysts and observers.

Glasnost was seen as crucial by the reformist leaders in implementing that other pillar of reform, *perestroika*. These two concepts can be viewed as two sides of the same coin with the latter slogan aiming at the revitalisation and modernisation of the Soviet economy. The enthusiastic participation of all strata of society - intellectuals, managers and workers especially - was avidly sought to ensure the success of the changes. The grim state of the Soviet economy, based as it was on the Stalinist command structure, had reached the level of terminal decline. Much of the reality of this had been camouflaged by both relentless propaganda and the alienation of civil society. The whole question of the need for radical structural reform or *perestroika* will be examined in detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, but it must be stressed that *glasnost* was an integral part of achieving this wider goal.

Brown emphasises that Gorbachev was, from 1985 to 1986, "clearing the ground for reform"⁹ and he further points out that "by 1986 he was moving towards giving priority to political over economic reform, not only because he believed that the former was a precondition of the latter but also because he thought liberalization and a broadening of the scope of political activity of existing partially moribund organizations, such as soviets and party committees (as distinct from the professional *apparat* which had usurped many of their powers) were desirable aims in themselves".¹⁰

The period of 1987-88 was "one of radical political reform."¹¹ At the plenum of the CPSU Central Committee in January 1987, Gorbachev emphasised the need for democratisation. He decried the debilitating effects which Stalinism

⁸ McCauley, *Gorbachev*, p.64.

⁹ Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, p.161.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.166.

had on political thinking and argued this situation “had remained largely fixed ‘at the level of the 1930s-1940s’ when ‘vigorous debates and creative ideas disappeared..... while authoritarian evaluations and opinions became unquestionable truths’”¹² The Party leader’s initially tentative and increasingly revisionist approach was to lead to greater democracy in the succeeding four years. He asserted that “*perestroika* itself is possible only through democracy and due to democracy. It is only in this way that it is possible to give scope to socialism’s most powerful creative force - free labour and free thought in a free country.”¹³

Walter Laquer observed that “*glasnost* has opened one of the most fascinating chapters in Russian cultural history and, to a lesser extent, in Soviet society”¹⁴ It must be noted that this author was writing in 1990 prior to the collapse of the entire Soviet edifice. Laquer was in no doubt that Gorbachev’s brave policies were to have a dramatic impact on the politics, economy and society of the USSR. He pays particular attention to the dynamic effect of the unleashing of *glasnost* in the cultural sphere. “Under *glasnost*, complaints about many aspects of Soviet life have been voiced in a way that was unthinkable even a few years ago.”¹⁵ The removal of restrictions on cultural activities such as the publication of books, performance of plays and cinema films, and the exhibition of previously prohibited paintings and sculptures certainly made intellectual life more exhilarating and invigorating. Of considerable interest to academic researchers was the freedom given to Soviet sociologists to approach academic disciplines in a more empirical manner, rather than merely adhering slavishly to the constricting confines of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Thus, various aspects of life in the Soviet Union, such as the position of women in society and their difficult economic role, were examined in a more Western methodological manner. Laquer declares that “the decision to launch the *glasnost* campaign was a

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Walter Laquer, Soviet realities, (New Brunswick, New Jersey, Transaction Publishers, 1990), p.5.

¹⁵ Ibid.

courageous one”¹⁶ Social evils previously regarded as unique to the capitalist world such as the astonishingly high rate of divorce, prostitution, alcoholism and a serious drug problem suddenly came under the spotlight of public discussion. Knowledge of the serious shortcomings of daily life was to have a direct effect on the stability of the Communist order and system, as the image previously propagated was demonstrably shown to be largely fictitious.

There could not but be a backlash from the entrenched right-wing forces who had much to lose from what *glasnost* was exposing. These forces consisted of both those committed to the Soviet model of socialism who were hostile to the changes which Gorbachev was implementing and also the bureaucratic strata, who numbered in the millions and had enjoyed both life-time security and a multitude of perks and privileges. Constant opposition from within the Party leadership’s conservative faction whose most prominent spokesman was Ygor Ligachev, did provide a brake to Gorbachev’s ambitions. The so-called ‘Nina Andreeva’ affair illustrates this. This involved a lengthy letter to the newspaper *Sovetskaya Rossiya* on 13 March 1988 from what was purported to be an obscure lecturer at a Leningrad technical institute. This letter denounced any critical analysis of the Stalinist legacy as a betrayal of both the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary founders of the Soviet Union and the ‘heroic’ efforts of Stalin and earlier generations to construct a developed socialist state during the 1930s and 1940s. It certainly served as a reminder that conservative forces which desired a return to the *status quo ante* were still able to make a direct assault on *glasnost* and on Gorbachev and his team of reformers. Brown observes that Andreeva’s anger at “the growing tendency to fill in the ‘blank spots’ in Soviet history with what to the detached observer were objective facts but which she interpreted as a denigration of a mainly heroic Soviet past”¹⁷ was expressed in a manner which occasioned temporary panic on the part of the reformers. Conditioned by their life-long experience of Soviet political reality, they interpreted the Andreeva letter as an indication of a change in the balance of power in favour of conservative

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, p.172.

anti-reform factions within the CPSU Politburo, backed by the KGB and military. The expectation was that reforms would be reversed by these hardline agencies and the individuals who headed them. The ‘Moscow spring’, it appeared, was over. The intelligentsia, particularly journalists and enthusiastic reformers within elements of the Party were temporarily cowed into silence. Years of blind obedience to authority had resulted in apathy and many observers were anticipating a conservative backlash.

Brown describes the ‘Nina Andreeva’ episode “as an attack on the main thrust of Gorbachev’s reforms and a plea to turn the clock back to the political practices and ideological beliefs characteristic of the unreformed Soviet system”.¹⁸ The response among most sectors of Soviet society - from intellectuals to ordinary workers - to the letter was that it was correctly suspected of being authorised and written with the full blessing of conservative leaders and that it was not merely the views of an obscure Leningrad teacher. It was true that the letter had strong support within certain sections of the CPSU leadership and the time of its publication in *Sovetskaya Rossiya* was well chosen. The absence of both Gorbachev and his closest ally Yakovlev from the country temporarily “strengthened the view of reformist intellectuals that there had been a change of Party line”.¹⁹ Gorbachev’s team insisted on an unsigned response being printed in *Pravda* on 5 April 1988 in which the Andreeva letter was roundly attacked and condemned. The reformist wing thus remained in control although Brown comments on how fragile support for democratic change in general and *glasnost* in particular remained. Thus, the incident showed that reform “still depended - three years after his coming to power - on Gorbachev and how little reliance could be placed at this time on democratic pressure from below to combat attempts by party conservatives to launch a counter-reformation”.²⁰ John Miller describes the ‘Nina Andreeva affair’ as “a frightening episode, showing the fragility of *glasnost* so long as it was not anchored in a bedrock of rights”.²¹ The institution of

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.173.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.174.

²¹ Miller, *Mikhail Gorbachev and the end of Soviet power*, p.98

important “democratic” structures in the late 1980s and early 1990s – particularly the Congress of People’s Deputies and the indirect election of Gorbachev as executive President of the USSR - laid the structural foundation for defeating the coup plotters of 19-21 August 1991. The establishment of the Congress, whilst being flawed in terms of a Western concept of democracy, was a brave venture, in giving the long suppressed people of this sprawling empire a taste of holding public leaders accountable. As an indirect consequence of this, a new mood on the part of the population, including the intelligentsia, workers and previously cowed ordinary citizens, was to see the attempt at reverting to communism fail. They had come to value their new freedoms. The decision to elevate Gorbachev to the Executive Presidency of the Soviet Union was aimed at supplying him with a legitimate basis of power that was located outside the Party. Previously, the General Secretary of the CPSU had automatically been the most powerful individual in the USSR, essentially a hangover from Stalin’s time where all political control had been accumulated by him in his role as dictator. It is crucial to note that Gorbachev chose to be indirectly elected by the Congress of People’s Deputies rather than seeking a popular mandate from the Soviet electorate. The reason for this lay in the insecurity which Gorbachev felt, particularly as he witnessed the rapidly growing popularity of Boris Yeltsin. In addition, the decline of the Soviet economy in the late 1980s had made him unpopular with certain segments of Soviet society and he regarded the cautious indirect approach to be the most prudent one. Of enormous significance was the election of his bitter rival Yeltsin, in June 1991, as President of the Russian Federation by the direct votes of universal adult suffrage of its people. This was to provide Yeltsin with a major base from which to oust Gorbachev from his position of authority following the demise of the USSR.

1989-90 was to witness the removal of Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution, vitally relevant for the progressive development of *glasnost*. It stated: “The leading and guiding force of Soviet society and the nucleus of its political system, of all state organisations and public organisations is the

Communist Party of the Soviet Union.”²² *Glasnost* had evolved to the extent where competitive politics were tolerated and even encouraged at the highest level of the Party itself. Since the October revolution of 1917 the CPSU had held a constitutionally guaranteed monopoly on all political power - its so-called leading role - and this had prevented any attempt at organised opposition operating against it. The demands for the removal of similar clauses in the satellite states of Eastern Europe had featured prominently in the ‘people’s power’ or ‘velvet revolutions’ which had swept away Communist rule in these nations. Gorbachev now realised that democratisation had developed to such a degree that Article 6 was essentially an anachronism. Miller observes that the disestablishment of the CPSU “was presented as a free and considered decision for which the Party thought the time was ripe”.²³ The Party retained its property and its political appointees did not lose their jobs. “Everything was done to minimise disruption, confrontation and humiliation, and at the same time to counter any impression that he [Gorbachev] was the Party’s hostage.”²⁴

Robert V. Daniels notes that by the time of the All-Union Party congress in July 1990 the conservative delegates who constituted a majority were “now demoralized”.²⁵ In Gorbachev’s ‘Report to the 28th Congress’ he painted a glowing picture of the onward march of democracy : “The political system is being radically transformed; genuine democracy is being established, with free elections, a multi-party system, and human rights; and real people’s power is being revived....The atmosphere of ideological *diktat* has been replaced by free thinking, *glasnost*, and the openness of society to information.”²⁶

However, all attempts to limit the effect of *glasnost* in creating a genuine public opinion would prove to be fruitless. The Congress of People’s Deputies was to result in a rapid removal of fear on the part of the masses in speaking their minds on political and economic issues. By reserving seats in the new Congress those in power, including Gorbachev, believed they could control *glasnost*. “It

²² *Ibid.*, p.135.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Robert V Daniels, The end of the Communist Revolution, (London, Routledge, 1993), p.39.

was a fundamental error”²⁷, writes Coleman. “Once given the power to say no, the Soviet people would no longer be satisfied with partial reform granted from the top down. They would press to extend the limited franchise Gorbachev had given them until pressure from the bottom up became the dominant political force in Russia. Ultimately that force would break up the U.S.S.R.”²⁸

2.2 The struggle for a civil society

The response of those forces which were ranged against Gorbachev, especially the organs of state power such as the KGB (the security and intelligence services) and the armed forces with their gigantic military-industrial complex, will now be analysed. The entire history of both pre-revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union militated against the successful democratisation of the country. Besides the army and KGB, there was also active opposition from ideological conservatives and the obstructive activities of the bureaucracy. The impending loss of total power and privileges meant that many people were immensely threatened by the new openness.

Baruch A. Hazan argues that “*glasnost* was the aspect of *perestroika* that affected the KGB more than any other”²⁹ organ of state, whether military or civilian. It is not difficult to see why this should have been so. The KGB had been created since the revolution (under various names such as the Cheka, MVD and OGPU) with the specific purpose of liquidating opponents of the Soviet government. The reality was that operating in secret had always been fundamental to its existence and function. The Stalin years (from Lenin’s death in 1924 to the demise of the dictator in 1953) had been an era where mass terror against his opponents and other ‘class enemies’ had been conducted in its very name. Even during the Gorbachev period the KGB continued to possess an absolute minefield of information on social, political and economic life in the USSR. The KGB was scarcely going to react warmly to the suggestion that it should give up its

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Coleman, The decline and fall of the Soviet empire, p.245.

²⁸ Ibid.

information monopoly. Thus, the public exposure of the sinister methods of dealing with dissidents (especially their confinement to mental hospitals and the rampant abuse of psychiatry) would only confirm the truth about what had previously been denounced as anti-Soviet slanders in the Western press. With the increasing revelations which *glasnost* brought about, the evidence of illegal arrests of individuals, the fabrication of cases against opponents and, most humiliating of all, the exposure of the widespread corruption within its ranks, saw the KGB's previous elite status come under direct threat. Hazan asserts that "*glasnost* was clearly causing pain to the KGB. There seemed to be no end to the spate of revelations of KGB and MVD abuses and corruption."³⁰ Besides its penchant for corruption and illegalities, "entire aspects of its activities came to be questioned"³¹ as a consequence of *glasnost*. Hazan quotes S. Pestov in an article entitled "In Moscow Everything is Secret." This author alluded to a huge "information vacuum" and argued for "a review of the instructions and directives that restrict the flow of information in the USSR".³² The masses needed to have widespread access to what really was happening in the USSR and it is significant that by early 1988 the KGB chiefs in five Soviet republics, together with lesser officials were dismissed.³³ KGB chief Viktor Chebrikov mounted a campaign to discredit *glasnost* arguing that only Western class enemies were benefiting from the undermining of the KGB's status and position. Thus, in a speech on 13 April 1988, in which he ritualistically credited "democracy and *glasnost*" for its role in "creating most favourable conditions for developing the initiative and creativity of the broad masses of working people"³⁴, he managed to contradict himself. He accused *glasnost* of causing "social demagoguery"³⁵ and "substituting bourgeois liberalism for the essence of the concept of socialist democracy".³⁶ Because of his thinly disguised hostility to reform, Gorbachev decided to remove him from his

²⁹ Baruch A Hazan, Gorbachev and his enemies, (Boulder, Westview Press, 1990), p.151.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.153.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² S.Pestov, 'In Moscow everything is secret', Washington Post, 18 September 1988.

³³ Hazan, Gorbachev and his enemies, p.153.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.159.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

post as KGB chief at the Central Committee plenum of 19-20 September 1989. He was replaced by Vladimir Kryuchkov, who proved to be a bad choice, as he was to be involved in the 1991 coup attempt.

During Gorbachev's first four years at the helm his major opponent was identified as Ygor Ligachev. Although the latter supported *perestroika* in principle he was very critical both of the liberalising trends of *glasnost* and the advance of a creeping capitalism. Gorbachev skillfully placed himself between Ligachev, the conservative, and Yeltsin, the liberal.

Gorbachev seized his opportunity to act decisively against his conservative opponents at the September 1988 plenum of the CPSU. Coleman identifies his main achievements: "Andrei Gromyko and three other Brezhnev era holdovers on the Politburo were eased into retirement. Conservatives left on the ruling body were first weakened numerically by the forced retirement of the Brezhnev old guard, then weakened further when their job responsibilities were downgraded."³⁷ Ligachev was relieved of his position in charge of ideology and KGB chief Chebrikov was deprived of his powerful position and replaced, as mentioned, in 1989, by Kryuchkov. Gorbachev also replaced conservatives on the Politburo with more progressive appointments, such as Vadim Medvedev who took over Ligachev's role and status. Finally, Gorbachev added the Presidency to his position as General Secretary of the CPSU, thus supplying himself with a constitutional power base independent of the Communist Party.³⁸ Coleman makes this observation on Gorbachev: "The September 1988 plenum was a milestone in another way. It also revealed a new political tactic that Gorbachev would now follow. As public support for *perestroika*, and for Mikhail Sergeevich personally, declined across the country, he would compensate by taking on increased political power for himself."³⁹

Glasnost among the political elite was articulated as being, in essence, democratisation. The election of a new parliamentary body, the Congress of Peoples' Deputies was vital to this goal and Gorbachev strengthened his own

³⁷ Coleman, *The decline and fall of the Soviet Union*, p.239.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.240.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

status by forcing through legislation giving the President real powers. Coleman observes: "These changes which he successfully rammed through, would revolutionize the nation's political system, and it goes without saying, substantially increase Gorbachev's own authority."⁴⁰ Strayer remarks concerning *glasnost* and the relationship of the masses with it: "Clearly it fostered a wave of hope, particularly among the intelligentsia and professional groups, that life could now be different and that their country might finally become 'normal', which was to say, western."⁴¹

That Gorbachev was undertaking a particularly risky strategy which certain vested interests were to be hostile to was always in his political calculations. Conservative hardliners (although weakened), the KGB and the military could mount a strong establishment backlash to reform. The military had its own priorities and was horrified by the loss of Eastern Europe in 1989. Gorbachev did have the factor of being the Party's leader and it had a tradition of not intervening in civilian affairs. Kotkin writes: "Having deliberately crippled the centralized party machine, Gorbachev retained control over the executive pillars of the Soviet state: the KGB and interior ministry (MVD), whose 'republic' branches were totally subordinated to Moscow, and the unified Soviet army."⁴² The military, though immensely powerful and possessing an enormous stockpile of nuclear weapons, was not a very helpful instrument in suppressing dissent. Kotkin illustrates this dilemma: "The difficulties of using the army domestically were made plain in April 1989, when a few hundred demonstrators in the Georgian capital, some advocating independence, were violently dispersed, resulting in around twenty deaths, an incident that threatened to ignite the entire Georgian nation. As everyday political instruments, the KGB, the MVD, and the army were no substitute for the party. Their use, moreover, was now subject to debate in the revamped Soviet parliament as well as in the republic legislatures."⁴³ The Soviet Union's geo-strategic position had been transformed overnight by

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.241.

⁴¹ Strayer, *Why did the Soviet Union collapse?*, p.102.

⁴² Kotkin, *Armageddon averted*, p.83

⁴³ Ibid.

the renunciation of the Brezhnev doctrine. Two factors contributed to Gorbachev maintaining his leadership position in the light of these events. Firstly, his skill as a political tactician and, secondly, the dramatic effect of *glasnost* in creating a new public opinion which could no longer be disregarded. This latter reality allowed him to outmanoeuvre the conservatives and greatly strengthened his capacity to achieve what Coleman terms “reform from the bottom up”⁴⁴ during 1989-1990. The public televising of the proceedings of the new Congress of People’s Deputies allowed open criticism of past and present Soviet leaders and their policies to be laid bare for public scrutiny. This was revolutionary and had a dramatic effect of freeing the ordinary individual from pervasive fear. The pace and goals of reform was greatly accelerated, with the removal of Article 6 of the Soviet constitution which had guaranteed the CPSU its leading role, being abolished, with Gorbachev’s blessing in 1990.

Hazan also differentiates between the forces which were arrayed against *glasnost*. He identifies two major factions, each striving to undermine Gorbachev. These consisted of the conservative ideological opposition who were horrified by the heretical deviations from the established Party orthodoxy, and those members of the bureaucracy who were fearful that their privileged status and position was being rapidly eroded and undermined. The author illustrates the different strategies employed in combating the reforms. Regarding the conservatives, he asserts that “unlike the bureaucrats, they do not enjoy the camouflaging anonymity provided by ‘the ministry’, ‘the committee’ and so forth. Indeed they do not seek the anonymity provided by the rank-and-file bureaucrats, for one of their main goals is to obtain wide publicity for their aims.”⁴⁵ Their hostility was directed at both *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Hazan continues: “In addition, whereas the bureaucrats outwardly subscribe to *perestroika* yet try to obstruct its detailed implementation in practical ways by simply continuing to perform their jobs in the old way, the conservatives prefer to present their claims in terms of serving the party and state.”⁴⁶ He concludes: “Moreover, the ultimate

⁴⁴ Coleman, *The decline and fall of the Soviet empire*, pp.244-271.

⁴⁵ Hazan, *Gorbachev and his enemies*, p.234.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

goal of their activity is beyond any doubt: to prevent *glasnost* and democratization, if necessary by ousting Gorbachev himself.”⁴⁷ A crucial factor which must not be overlooked is that both communism and the Soviet regime had long since lost its legitimacy in the eyes of its subjects. The complete divergence between theory and reality could only be maintained by an ever vigilant and all intrusive security organ such as the KGB. Also, the absolute control of the sources of public information, such as newspapers, radio and television, was a distinguishing feature of this kind of totalitarianism. The complete subjugation of the nation’s culture to an all embracing ideological censorship had long since been stoically accepted by the masses as an aspect of life over which they had no control. Thus, Walter Laquer writes that “the impact of *glasnost* has been felt most palpably in the cultural field. The year 1987 was the *annus mirabilis* of Soviet literature, witnessing not just a second thaw but a true cultural blossoming, released (or almost released) from the frigid grasp of censorship. It was a time of enormous spiritual ferment and creative openness, of a kind and an extent not known for six decades.”⁴⁸

After a hesitant beginning in 1985-86, all fields of culture began to feel the liberating winds of *glasnost*. Brian McNair analyses the period of the late 1980s and points to the increasing boldness of the media. He remarks: “As *glasnost* and *perestroika* began to be reflected in the content of the Soviet media, demand for newspapers and magazines increased. By 1988 demand had outstripped supply, leading to restrictions on opportunities for subscription to many organs.”⁴⁹ He pays particular attention to the filling in of the “blank spots” of Soviet history since 1917. McNair comments on how “before the *glasnost* campaign control of history was one of the most important aspects of the Party’s ideological work”.⁵⁰ Prior to Gorbachev’s reforms the role of the media was to produce a “distorted and frequently dishonest account of history, from which all

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Laquer, *Soviet realities*, p.7.

⁴⁹ McNair, *Glasnost, perestroika and the Soviet media*, p.59.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.62.

facts contrary to the Party's authorised version of events were expunged."⁵¹ An absurd aspect of what passed for Soviet history was the constant rewriting of the roles of various leadership figures such as Stalin, Krushchev and Brezhnev to reflect the opinions of the current person in power. That this could only lead to public cynicism and undermine belief in building socialism was a factor which *glasnost* would have to rectify. (Only Lenin escaped public discrediting). The exposure of the appalling atrocities and crimes of Stalin and his ruthlessness now were openly discussed in newspapers, including such faithful exponents of the Party line such as *Pravda*.

Clearly, factors which *glasnost* was releasing, including the new freedom from fear, were having a cumulative effect on the masses which, as the years of reform progressed, were to further erode the whole notion that the ideology of Marxism-Leninism was the only way to construct a free and just society. Thus, perhaps in retrospect, the failure to reverse the whole Gorbachev experiment is not so surprising as a new public opinion had come to exist with a new generation who had not personally experienced the Stalin years and World War 2. No recourse to heavy handed military force could subjugate what Gorbachev had achieved.

As far as the Soviet bureaucracy is concerned, Hazan observes that this strata of society had a vested interest in maintaining and prolonging the survival of the old order. He writes that the *apparat* focused on the economic aspects of reforms whereas the chief enemy of the conservative ideologues was *glasnost*, in particular "the erosion of the party's supremacy in the Soviet society".⁵² On the other hand the bureaucrats sought no widespread publicity in achieving their goal of self-preservation. "Anonymity suits their goals",⁵³ he writes, and "they prefer to stall by ignoring new instructions, continuing to implement the old regulations, and meticulously sticking to written letters in order to prevent new initiatives and slow down as much as possible the processes of economic revitalization favoured by Gorbachev."⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Hazan, *Gorbachev and his enemies*, p.224.

⁵³ Ibid.

While the activities of the *apparat* tended to be aimed more at *perestroika*, its entire existence and functioning as a parasitic class was threatened by *glasnost*. I will return to the discussion of the resistance to *perestroika* in Chapter 3 but for now it suffices to list the six main methods employed by the bureaucrats which Hazan identifies. These are “depriving workers collectives of their rights”⁵⁵, “simulating ‘acceleration’ by intensifying production of unnecessary goods”⁵⁶, “violating citizens constitutional rights”⁵⁷, “using ministerial power to impede the activity of collectives”⁵⁸ (essentially blocking the relatively limited opportunities offered by new legislation such as the Law on State Enterprises to various associations and enterprises, for example *kolkhozes*, from being implemented), “activity against the co-operatives”⁵⁹ (the outright refusal by the bureaucrats to allow these enterprises to set their own higher price, even if their costs merited it), and “paperwork.”⁶⁰ Gorbachev’s major weapon against both conservatives and bureaucrats was to appeal to public opinion by making the Party more democratic. The Soviet public began to become accustomed to *glasnost* in the media, politics and public life. Thus, the reporting of bad news such as major disasters caused the gulf between the Soviet and Western media to become somewhat narrowed. This increasing access to public information was noticed by observers of both sides, including Western Sovietologists. McNair argues that “in particular, Soviet journalism is increasingly focused not only on the process of socialist construction, but also on the events which punctuate it”.⁶¹ The Chernobyl tragedy was initially hushed up but its acknowledgement and its public admission on the part of the leadership of the USSR gave a powerful impetus to this new freedom.

Secondly, *glasnost* now allowed the Soviet authorities to concede the existence of a serious crime problem in the USSR. Previously, crime was

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.225.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.226.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.227.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.230.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.232.

⁶¹ McNair, *Glasnost, perestroika and the Soviet media*, p.64.

regarded as a phenomenon specific to capitalist societies. McNair writes:

“However, crime is a problem in the USSR, a fact which, as a consequence of *glasnost*, can now be openly declared. It can also be admitted that the averting of eyes by journalists before 1985 was due mainly to the Party’s reluctance to concede this reality.”⁶²

Thirdly, the acknowledgement of dissent on the part of many dissidents in Soviet society, whether political or religious, was yet another feature of *glasnost*. McNair states that this concept “has also sanctioned the inclusion on the domestic news agenda of politically problematic topics such as religion, dissidence, street protests and emigration”.⁶³

Writing in 1990 Walter Laquer argues that, at that stage *glasnost* was not yet irreversible. He writes that “*glasnost* will be increasingly endangered because all kinds of previously suppressed tensions are now coming to the fore”.⁶⁴ The argument of the conservatives, of whom many were still active in positions of authority, was that Soviet society was completely unprepared for political freedom and would not be in the near to long term future. The authoritarian nature of Russian and Soviet history provided an unpromising backdrop to Gorbachev’s liberalising experiment. Historians already have and will continue to attribute enormous credit to the last General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party because he achieved the irreversibility of *glasnost* and drastic political reform within six short years. Reforming Tsars had not brought about such fundamental political reform. They had always been wary of the slippery slope of granting freedom of expression to the masses of their empire. Gorbachev did so, although he did not foresee the consequences of making the USSR a more humane and law-based state. This is, indeed, ironic.

⁶² Ibid., p.68.

⁶³ Ibid., p.69.

⁶⁴ Laquer, *Soviet realities*, p. 13.

CHAPTER 3

The domestic socio-economic and political consequences of *perestroika*

3.1. Economic reforms and the Communist legacy

Perestroika (or restructuring) was the second, and to many ordinary Soviet citizens, the most important aspect of the radical reforms instituted by Gorbachev. The main focus was to transform the economy of the Soviet Union which had been functioning extremely poorly during the latter years of the era of Brezhnev (1964-1982). The inheritance of an immensely ossified system which Stalin had put in place during the 1930s meant that consumers in the USSR were very badly served compared with the nations of the West and Japan. This phenomenon covered a wide range of economic activities, from agriculture to housing and, most disturbing, in the arena of hi-tech industries. The most significant aspect of the latter was the revolution in computerisation which was rapidly transforming the working and domestic lives of people in the non-communist world, as well as introducing new industries wherein the Soviet Union simply could not afford to lag behind

Perhaps the most debilitating area and one which had always proved to be the achilles heel of the Soviet economy was agriculture. The failure of the Union to feed its people was a telling indictment of Soviet propaganda. Its origins lie in the forced collectivisation of all farms of this gigantic state, into giant collectives during the 1930s. The worst aspect of this incomprehensibly brutal action of the dictator Stalin was that it liquidated the kulak class of peasants who had been the most enterprising and innovative element of rural Russia, and who had benefited most from Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP). There was simply no incentive for peasants to increase production and collectivised agriculture was immensely unproductive. This feature of Soviet life continued to be an inhibiting factor

greatly militating against the normal accumulation of wealth by more productive elements of the peasantry.

Gorbachev was very aware that the Stalinist command economy he had inherited was simply not delivering the promised goods to the masses. Marshall I. Goldman asserts that Gorbachev re-emphasised what Yuri Andropov had begun to implement: the strengthening of the economy of the USSR and, especially, of labour discipline. He writes: "Although not as relentless as Andropov in his crackdown on labor absenteeism, he made a special effort to expose corruption and self-dealing. Gorbachev went even further, however, in his crackdown on alcoholism."¹ There can be no doubt that the effects of widespread alcoholism on the Soviet economy and society at large, was immense. The sheer costs to the state in every aspect, from frequent absenteeism from work, to the horrendous impact of alcoholism on family life and the related burden on health services and social welfare were extremely debilitating. Alcohol abuse had been "an integral part of the Russian way of life for centuries"² and Gorbachev must have been aware that a firm crackdown would bring him widespread unpopularity among the rank-and-file Soviet citizens for whom alcohol was their only escape from the bleak reality of their daily lives under communism. In addition, curbing the availability and consumption of alcohol on such a large scale, meant a huge shortfall in tax revenue. This lack of public finances constituted a crucial aspect in the initial failure of *perestroika* and led to the production of 'moonshine' liquor suddenly becoming one of the few Soviet growth industries. Brown quotes Soviet economic reformer Nikolay Shmelev in early 1988: "by giving away its revenue to the bootlegger, the government in the last two years has sharply increased its budgetary imbalance and incurred a deficit which is today being covered in a most dangerous and unhealthy way, by the printing press."³

A dangerous consequence of such a strategy was to generate rampant inflation, which Soviet propaganda had always viewed as a uniquely capitalist

¹ Marshall I. Goldman, *What went wrong with perestroika*, (New York, W.W.Norton and Co.,1991), p.81.

² *Ibid.*

³ Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, p.142, quoted from Shmelev, 'Novye trevogi', p.162.

phenomenon. The economic reality was that too many roubles were chasing too few goods and, if *perestroika* was to have any prospect of succeeding in revitalising the Soviet economy, this course was creating the twin dangers of a massive budget deficit and rapidly increasing prices.

Mention has already been made of the disastrous state of the agricultural sector, mainly the result of Stalin's collectivisation in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Right throughout the entire duration of its existence, agriculture remained the soft underbelly of the economy of the Soviet Union. Like alcoholism, all attempts failed to improve the situation - admittedly state ownership of all rural land had always been a non-negotiable principle. There had, however, been various experiments in other communist countries, all with a varying degree of success. Gorbachev was well aware that drastic reform measures were necessary if food production was to increase. Brown observes that "Gorbachev was an admirer of the Hungarian agricultural reform, which combined some of the advantages of large-scale agricultural production with the granting of a great deal of autonomy to co-operatives to buy equipment and sell their produce relatively freely, while granting individual members of the co-operative the possibility to diversify into other production in seasons when they had time on their hands".⁴ The positive results of such innovation, coupled with the dramatic success of agricultural reforms in China, where a wide-scale abandonment of communal farming in favour of individual farming had taken place, was not lost on Gorbachev. Enormous barriers to the introduction of such changes existed, however, in rural Russia. Thus, even before Gorbachev became the head of state he informed his Hungarian counterpart: "Unfortunately, in the course of the last fifty years the Russian peasant has had all the independence knocked out of him."⁵ The Russian peasantry had borne the brunt of building Stalin's command economy. Besides being both demoralised and alienated, it was constituted by a seriously disproportionate number of women as well as the elderly. These were inhibiting factors for reformers to bear in mind.

⁴ Ibid., p.142.

⁵ Ibid., p.143.

In addition, collectivisation was also an article of faith for many loyal communists. This meant that there were significant ideological constraints on the reformers. Russian peasants were, after seventy years of the planned economy, very unfamiliar with the demands of the market. Capitalism was, by now, a totally alien form of economic organisation. Whilst tiny plots were allocated to rural labourers to tend in their spare time, the market still did not exist in any meaningful form. Gorbachev had to tread warily. There was always the danger of destroying the present collectivised system without putting anything new in its place.

Brown argues that three particular differences existed between the Soviet experience and that of China and Hungary, which militated against bolder action. Firstly, the fact that Soviet socialism was a generation older than that of either of these two countries. He writes that "in China and Hungary there were people in the countryside who still remembered what it was like to farm independently".⁶ Such people who remained were very old and few in number. Secondly, "in Russia there had been a flight from the land of the youngest and ablest potential workers and Soviet farming was much more heavily dependent on capital equipment than was China, where a labour intensive agriculture could rapidly produce results once the shackles were removed from the peasantry".⁷ The third factor which Brown isolates is the sheer vastness of both Russia and the Soviet Union "where the transport and marketing of agricultural produce was an altogether formidable task".⁸

Thus, the continuing drain on the Soviet Union's balance of payments brought about by the regular need to import copious quantities of grain from the USA in particular, meant that turning the *apparat* - run economic machine into an efficient system was an intractable task. The dysfunctional Soviet economy was failing to fulfil even the modest desires of the country's citizens, such as adequate housing and a more plentiful and varied food supply, which had for so long been

⁶ Ibid., p.144.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

promised. This was so despite the honest and enthusiastic intentions and efforts of reformers such as Yakovlev and Abel Aganbegyan. The former was one of the major architects behind the reform effort, whilst the latter was a prominent Soviet economist who was devising a strategy to introduce market mechanisms to the Soviet economy.

The further development of events was to completely refocus the goals which Gorbachev and his dedicated team were striving to achieve. Observing their activities and approach more than a decade later, one must identify elements of both enthusiasm for the cause of reforming the entire Soviet Union, and the knowledge that powerful factions and individuals within the Party would resist changes which threatened their hold on power. Thus, whereas in 1985 *perestroika* meant the renewal of socialism and the repair of the creaking economic mechanism (which was also straining under President Reagan's escalation of the arms race), *perestroika* became increasingly radical during 1986 and 1987. The alarm bells among conservatives were ringing loudly, led by Ygor Ligachev, as their greatest fear of a restoration of capitalism was beginning to materialise before their very eyes. Their efforts at digging their heels in and obstructing restructuring were to fail, mainly because of the terminal nature of the ossified command economy. The creation of a market economy in place of a planned one had few parallels from which any economist could draw. This was particularly so where the levels of industrialisation were so far advanced, as was the case with the USSR. The most celebrated attempt was that of the two reform-minded economists, Stanislav Shatalin and Grigory Yavlinsky, who devised what became known as the Shatalin 500 day program (named after the former who was the senior of the two), in 1990. The plan involved a rapid transition to a market economy within 500 days. Gorbachev was initially very supportive of the efforts of the Shatalin team but hostility from conservative forces forced him to distance himself from the program. Nevertheless, the dramatic changes from Gorbachev's early days on assuming office in 1985 until the early 1990s remain quite staggering in their rapid evolution.

Martin McCauley asserts that Gorbachev in 1985 still believed that the Leninist course was the right one. He quotes him: "We must not change our policy. It is right, correct, authentically Leninist. We have to accelerate our rhythm, go ahead, be frank and overcome our faults and see clearly our luminous future."⁹ It is important to stress that Gorbachev always claimed to be a true follower of Marx and Lenin. It is not surprising that hardliners such as Ygor Ligachev were extremely suspicious of *glasnost*, *perestroika*, *uskorenie* (acceleration) and the call for greater democracy within the USSR. It would be incorrect, however to be too cynical about Gorbachev's goals. He continually had to balance the urgent need for reform with the hostility of his opponents. By 1987 it had become clear to Gorbachev "that he was confronted with a systemic crisis: the system itself was in terminal decline"¹⁰ An illustration of this predicament was that according to top economist Abel Aganbegyan in 1988, there had been no growth in the Soviet economy in the years 1981-1985¹¹ and even this scenario can be viewed as somewhat optimistic as other economists were of the view that there had actually been negative growth during this period. McCauley alludes to the fact that the extent of this crisis was not acknowledged in 1985 and, therefore, the initial steps to deal with this critical problem failed.¹² The author quotes Gorbachev: "Of major importance are such fundamental problems as ways of accelerating scientific and technical progress and intensifying production."¹³ He also refers to the need for an "improvement of the system of distributive relations"¹⁴ All this failed to supply the only viable long-term remedy which was to liquidate and replace the Stalinist inheritance, a reality which would take the General Secretary six years to accept.

Even in the early years of *perestroika* Gorbachev was aware of the stifling and suffocating grip which central planning held over the economy. McCauley

⁹ McCauley, *Gorbachev*, p.55.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p.56.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p.57.

¹⁴ Ibid.

analyses Gorbachev and his reform team's thinking that state-owned enterprises could act as market agents.¹⁵ He identifies two particular flaws in Gorbachev's thinking, "ownership and prices".¹⁶ The entire ideology of Marxism-Leninism viewed the individual ownership of private property as anathema. Prices were not allowed to reach realistic levels dictated by the conventional norms of supply and demand and a major feature of the Soviet pricing system was the existence of huge state subsidies. The short-term advantage of this was to keep the masses quiet, but this was undermined by a fatal flaw: the immense drain on the public finances which terminated all prospects for innovation

By 1987 it was clear that *perestroika* was failing to deliver what Gorbachev had promised. The economy was deteriorating and the General Secretary's critics, on both the political right and left, were complaining about where he was leading the Soviet Union. McCauley alludes to the situation: "It was thought that *perestroika* would result in rising living standards and there would be no unemployment as the economy was restructured. There would be no losers, everyone would be a winner. The people had decided finally and irrevocably in favour of socialism. They would not tolerate the dilution of the socialist ownership of the means of production and the social gains of socialism."¹⁷ After 1987 events unfolded rapidly, both internationally and domestically. They were to culminate in the anti-climactic collapse of this vast empire which had for seventy years been regarded as the world's first socialist state.

Concerning this latter period, Goldman alludes to the more adventurous nature of Gorbachev's approach to restructuring. He writes: "Unlike the first batch of economic reforms in 1985, the second set seemed to reflect a turning away from the Stalinist economic system. Gorbachev adopted a more tolerant, even a more supportive attitude toward market mechanisms. While he had not given up his determination to remain a socialist he saw the need for far-reaching remedies."¹⁸ He draws attention to the countervailing struggle of what were

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.63.

¹⁸ Goldman, What went wrong with *perestroika*, p.111.

termed conservative or right-wing forces. It must be noted that during the entire period when Gorbachev led the USSR, the term conservative or right-wing was used to denote the communist hardliners who wished to hold on to the Stalinist or even Leninist economic and political system. Similarly, liberal reformers were categorised as left-wing. Thus, the terminology used to indicate the political spectrum in the Soviet Union was inverted - an indication as to just how rigid or moribund political life had become in this vast geo-political entity.

Goldman argues that Gorbachev's "continued shifting between anti-reform and reform measures might be explained as the inevitable consequence of the fact that he had no road map. He knew where he wanted to end up, with a more productive, consumer-oriented economy (Japan would do), but he did not know how to get there."¹⁹ The fact that there was no relevant precedent for a country with a command economy converting to a capitalist market-orientated system meant that his actions tended to be more of an ad hoc nature. "He tried one approach for a while and, if that did not produce results quickly, he then tried something else or reversed himself, only to end up in another dead end,"²⁰ the author asserts.

3.2. The transformation of the Communist Party

During this period there were dramatic new influences on Soviet politics. John Miller regards *perestroika* as not merely reflecting changes to the economic base but it also "meant true *perestroika* (reconstruction) of institutions."²¹ Unlike, for example, the Chinese economic reformers, Gorbachev had always viewed political and economic reform as going together. A vigorous and dynamic debate within society, so he reasoned, could only provide a positive economic spin-off. The alienated masses would be more content and, also, more productive.

In July of 1988 various reform measures were legislated at the XIX conference of the Communist Party. Miller identifies three essential purposes:

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Miller, Mikhail Gorbachev and the end of Soviet power, p.81.

firstly, representative and responsible government involving free elections for a parliament which had the power to accept or reject legislative measures and appoint or dismiss the executive. The second point was "limitations on government: officials (state and Party) might serve no more than two five-year terms."²² The third purpose was the introduction of the rule of law, "implying inter alia a new and serious role for the constitution, constitutional review, legal clarification of the Party's position in politics, and the Party's subjection to law."²³ Miller observes that "the Party had accepted that *perestroika* entailed changes to itself."²⁴ This latter reality was clearly a very bitter pill for many in the CPSU to swallow. The party of Lenin had for seventy years held an unchallenged grasp on the levers of political power. Many had come to fear that the "writing was on the wall" once the revolutions against communist rule had swept over Eastern Europe in 1989. In 1988, it is likely that only the most optimistic reformer would have contemplated 'disestablishment' of the Soviet Communist Party - i.e. the constitutionally entrenched leading role of the Party set out in Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution. The rapid progress of events was to lead to this happening in March 1990. Whether Gorbachev foresaw this outcome is not certain even today but it was a natural consequence of the transfer of political authority from the Party to the state. The election of the Congress of People's Deputies in 1989 and Gorbachev's assumption of the Presidency of the Soviet Union in March 1990 also underlined his embracement of the law-based state.

3.3. The first signs of failure

Meanwhile, the economic situation kept on deteriorating, with the lives of ordinary working people becoming ever more difficult and unhappy. *Perestroika* was not delivering what had been promised. The reality was that the old system of central planning had been sufficiently undermined and even showed signs of collapse, but the structures of the market had yet to be put in place. Efforts of

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

right-wing elements within the Party in sabotaging *perestroika* led to the General Secretary stepping up his call for democratisation, with the aim of winning mass support. Goldman observes that “until the man in the street could feel he had some check on the behaviour of the party, government or, enterprise, he would never believe that he had a stake in *perestroika*”.²⁵ The reformers knew that there was a very close and direct link between *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Tatiana Zaslavskaja , a prominent Soviet sociologist and a leading reformer argued as follows: “Worker apathy can only be overcome if politicians give an honest explanation of why the Soviet economy is in such a poor state.”²⁶ She continues: “The habit of half-truths....in a certain sense is worse than lies. If you conceal from people....information about the conditions of their own life, you cannot expect them to become more effective in either the economic or political sphere. People’s trust and support can be obtained only in response to the trust placed in them.”²⁷

Coleman compares the task of Gorbachev and his team of reformers as being akin to fixing an airplane in flight.²⁸ His first celebrated slogan was *uskoreniye* or acceleration in the sense that both quantitative and qualitative changes were planned, with the goal of doubling gross national income in fifteen years by the year 2000. Abel Aganbegyan who was Gorbachev’s chief economic adviser set down the strategy: “We are going over from an authoritarian to a democratic economy, an economy governed by the people, with substantial involvement of the masses in economic management.”²⁹ The major obstacle, and one which was never resolved, was how to implement such ambitious aims given the very nature of the economic reality the reformers had to work with. There was very little co-operation from the economic ministries or bureaucracy whose numbers Coleman estimates at 20 million.³⁰ This veritable army of paper shufflers had supreme control over deciding what was to be produced, when, where and in

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Goldman, *What went wrong with perestroika*, p.104.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Coleman, *The decline and fall of the Soviet empire*, p.228.

²⁹ Ibid.

what quantities down to the last nut and bolt. All these functions would, in a market economy be regulated by the law of supply and demand and, were the Soviet Union to shift from the command economy to a form of market, their presence would be superfluous. However, such a transition was far more difficult to implement than merely devise in an abstract way. The plan to convert the Union, remarks Coleman, was flawed because the bureaucrats and their allies in the Politburo (the conservatives) possessed a veto over the implementation of any such scheme.³¹

Moreover, the economic measures that were adopted in 1986 and 1987 had negative consequences for Gorbachev's last four years as a leader. Goldman, while crediting Gorbachev with trying to move forward urgently with *perestroika*, argues that "because of indecision, inconsistency, and a poor understanding of the underlying economic forces involved, his amended economic reforms also failed to produce the desired results. In fact, because of the reluctant and half-hearted nature of many of these economic efforts, more harm than good was done."³² The legacy of hostility to private trading, whether in co-operatives, joint ventures, or individual farming, meant that very little improvement in the private sector could be discerned. The law of supply and demand applying in the arena of enterprises that were not connected with the government, reflected a hike in prices to accommodate economic reality. The Soviet public was accustomed to queueing until shelves were empty but, in the state sector, prices were not allowed to rise in response. Goldman asserts that rising prices in the infant private sector resulted in, for example, the popular perception that "co-operatives came to be viewed as either institutions owned by the Soviet version of the mafia or opportunities for illegal actions by state institutions".³³

Brown sums up what Gorbachev was striving to achieve in 1986 and 1987: "The maxim that everything was permitted that the law did not specifically

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.229.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Goldman, *What went wrong with perestroika*, p.110.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.113.

forbid was explicitly written into three major pieces of economic legislation - the Law on Individual Labour Activity(1986), the Law on the State Enterprise(1987), and the Law on Co-operatives(1988).”³⁴

The discrepancy between such attempts at economic reform during 1986-87 and their unexpected results in the following four years emerged because of the failure to recognise that the retention of centralised control was a severe hindrance to accelerating economic activity. Brown alludes to the “Law on the State Enterprise”. It was hamstrung, the same author argues, by “the illusion that de-centralization of decision-making to the industrial enterprise could produce better results without being accompanied by a much more substantial marketization - including, in particular, demonopolization and price liberalization”.³⁵ The consequence of the “Enterprise Law” was that it “fuelled inflation, promoted inter-enterprise debt and failure to pay taxes to central budget, and did much more harm than good”.³⁶ Strayer remarks this new law was the most widely devised aspect of *perestroika*, and the goal was “to free the actual productive units - the enterprises - of the Soviet economy from the heavy hand of central government ministries”.³⁷ The desire was that enterprises, over time, would greatly reduce the ratio of state orders to private ones. Strayer observes that “it did not, however, work as planned”.³⁸ The bureaucrats managed to retain their control of state supplies and their monopoly of state orders and the result was that the economic situation merely deteriorated. Many enterprise managers were far too inexperienced in operating independently of state orders that they had little enthusiasm for seeking anything from the private sector. Reform did weaken the central ministries’ influence over the economy, as is evidenced from the decline in the number of staff members working in them. The figure cited by Strayer reveals that this fell from 1.6 million in 1986 to 871,000 in 1989.³⁹

³⁴ Brown, The Gorbachev factor, p.146.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.147.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Strayer, Why did the Soviet Union collapse?, p.115.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.116.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Zdenek Mlynar, writing in the period before Soviet power collapsed, remarks that “the 19th All-Union CPSU Conference in June 1988 greatly strengthened the position of the forces linked with the reform ideology”.⁴⁰ However, despite strong resistance and dissent on the part of conservatives such as Ligachev, there was no coherent alternative to what Gorbachev was implementing. Mlynar asserts that “Gorbachev repeatedly stated at the Conference that the irreversibility of *perestroika* is not yet guaranteed”.⁴¹ On the other hand, any attempt to turn the Soviet economy into reverse gear and undo the reforms was impossible. By the late 1980s, *perestroika* was not even delivering a modest rise in living standards. On the contrary, things were deteriorating. Goldman argues that “the undermining of the planning system and the collapse of the economy, combined with continuing restrictions on non-government groups, had a negative effect on efforts to expand Soviet foreign trade and attract Western investment”.⁴² The remnants of the old system, where the Ministry of Foreign Trade regulated all relations between a Soviet enterprise and foreign buyers and sellers, continued to act as a disincentive to any realistic attempt to expand trade with the industrial nations of the capitalist world. Goldman argues: “Access to *valuta* and imported machinery was more a matter of political influence than economics.”⁴³ He continues, declaring that “the typical Soviet enterprise was not allowed to hold *valuta* and therefore anything that it had was provided to it by the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Foreign Trade. In turn, the enterprise had to forfeit anything that it earned by exporting and depositing the proceeds with the same two ministries.”⁴⁴ He concludes: “No wonder Soviet enterprises never seemed to be interested in expanding their exports or moderating the magnitude of their imports.”⁴⁵

The lack of sophistication of Soviet managers, who had neither the skills nor the experience to cope with foreign trade only compounded the difficulties of

⁴⁰ Mlynar, Can Gorbachev change the Soviet Union, p.34.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Goldman, What went wrong with perestroika, p. 156.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.157.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

an empire in flux. The inevitable result of rapidly increasing indebtedness as far as the balance of payments was concerned, coupled with a mounting budget deficit, resulted in a dismally performing economy with few prospects of matters improving. Even foreign firms such as McDonald's which were prepared to accept the huge difficulties of unpaid debts and stifling red tape, were portrayed by conservatives - and also many members of the Russian general public - as exploiters out to rob the country of its riches. The lack of familiarity of Soviet consumers resulted in absurdities (to Western eyes) such as people joining only the longest queue, in Moscow's McDonald's, despite their being 27 cash registers. The expectation "that the longest line forms in front of the counter with the most desirable goods"⁴⁶ only demonstrated just how ingrained attitudes and beliefs had become after seventy years. By 1989, Goldman concludes that for Gorbachev "most likely, even an all-out reform would not have increased supplies significantly. After seventy years of bureaucratism, the Soviet people have learned to weather the various storms of reform that blow in from different directions. Sooner or later they pass, without making too much of a mark. Unfortunately, each failure leads only to increased cynicism, which in turn compromises other efforts in the future."⁴⁷ Strayer summarises the dilemma facing the reformers: "But there was no functioning market system to replace the discredited and partially dismantled planning system. Neither the institutions of the market - credit, a banking system, contract law, wholesalers, free prices - nor the values of the market - competition, risk taking, personal responsibility - had substantially developed in the few years of the Gorbachev era. Thus, *perestroika* created a kind of limbo economy, in which neither the Plan nor the market worked effectively."⁴⁸

During 1990-91 Gorbachev decided to take the proverbial "bull by the horns." Because of the bleak economic reality, *perestroika* was increasingly blamed for the intolerable difficulties of everyday life. With the demise of the command economy, there could be no doubt that clinging to the increasingly

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.167.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.170-171.

⁴⁸ Strayer, Why did the Soviet Union collapse?, p.116.

outworn and irrelevant ideology of Marxism-Leninism was only serving as a brake on progress. However, the need for a drastic overhaul of so-called "developed socialism" with its emphasis on central planning, led even the General Secretary of the CPSU to accept the dire need for a transition to a market economy. This had always been the biggest nightmare of the conservatives and Gorbachev's skills as a master political tactician were to be sorely tested. Thus, in 1990 he intensified the move towards the market - at least theoretically. However, the autumn and winter of 1990-91 also witnessed a marked strategic retreat from reform as the pressure from conservative opponents mounted. This phenomenon was only temporary, however. The reasons behind this development can only be that the pressures from those who continued to possess a significant grip on the levers of power - Kryuchkov (the head of the KGB), the army and the Party itself - had become more intense as desperation mounted. The rapid overt resistance to reform was driven by the fact that many in the Party and the bureaucracy were witnessing the floundering of the Soviet economy, considerably accelerated by *perestroika* failing to deliver any of the much anticipated improvement. The rapid collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the overnight disappearance of the Warsaw Pact had totally undermined the one achievement of which many conservative were so proud, i.e. the attainment of strategic parity with the USA and the achievement of post-war superpower military status. Many in the Party blamed Gorbachev and the whole reform experiment, and it is perhaps surprising that stronger opposition had not arisen earlier. 1990-91 came to determine the fate of this vast multi-national Union, which for seventy years had acted as if it were a single state.

The decision to embrace the market and ditch socialism was taken because it was the only rational way forward for a moribund economy which had exhausted all its options. The reaction of workers and the "man in the street" was interesting. Generally, they had always reflected a sense of resignation with the miserable lot they had been bequeathed from a revolution ostensibly conducted in their name. Goldman analyses these contradictions and argues that "given the way ordinary workers had been exploited under communism, it might have been

expected that Soviet workers would have been in the forefront of the reform movement".⁴⁹ The author continues, asserting that the fact that "in 1989, almost half the country's coal miners struck and eventually organised their own independent unions dedicated to reform"⁵⁰ would appear to have given a powerful impetus to Gorbachev's efforts at creating a more humane and just society. But the conservatives and their *apparatus* allies were not yet a spent force. That their immediate western neighbour, Poland, had been the birth-place of Solidarity which had pioneered the independent trade union movement in the former Soviet bloc of nations, was not lost on the rightists. After all, communism had been successfully overthrown in that country and the defenders of Soviet power were witnessing the whole world of their privileges and "Orwellian" control of society and state collapsing before their very eyes.

The example of the United Russian Workers Front indicates how the CPSU was still able to appeal to a certain constituency and conduct a political campaign against everything Gorbachev was striving to achieve. The leader of this workers' organisation, Veniamin Yarin, was outspoken in his opposition to reform. He was "highly critical of Gorbachev's efforts to switch the Soviet economy to a market orientation and the resulting income inequalities that the market is likely to bring".⁵¹ However, Gorbachev skillfully came to co-opt Yarin by making him a member of the cabinet-like Presidential Council and he eventually faded into obscurity. Ultimately, the efforts at halting the onward march of reform and the market, despite certain temporary successes, were to fail ignominiously. *Perestroika* had advanced to such an extent, along with *glasnost*, that the fate of the 1991 coup attempt was sealed.

A distinguishing feature of *perestroika* during 1990-91 was the coalescing of a working team of economists which became known as the Shatalin-Yavlinsky group. Brown recounts how Gorbachev supported them and "took an interest in the work of the team as it proceeded in a dacha near Moscow throughout

⁴⁹ Goldman, What went wrong with perestroika, p.189.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.190.

August”⁵² of 1990. The ‘500 Days Program’ or ‘Shatalin’ plan (mentioned earlier) banished both socialism and the whole ideology of Marxism-Leninism as a viable concept on which to structure the Soviet economy. Brown observes: “It incorporated the ideas of large-scale privatization, a great devolution of power to the republics, and the speedy construction of market institutions.”⁵³ Their effect was that “they spelled the end of state socialism and were utterly inconsistent with the idea that Gorbachev was still a Communist in any meaningful sense of the term, even though he was still General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union! In fact, one of the more striking features of this episode is that he had entirely bypassed the party.”⁵⁴ The Shatalin plan was complete anathema to conservative communists who had always viewed the market and private property as institutions of exploitation which they had completely reviled. In pre-Gorbachev days, the endless barrage of propaganda exuded from all aspects of Soviet information channels - from kindergarten levels to the television and radio services - had inured them from any positive reaction to the ‘creeping capitalism’ of *perestroika*.

3.4. Factors hindering opposition to Gorbachev’s reforms.

What is most remarkable in the entire context of Gorbachev’s role as Soviet leader is that he managed to survive so long at the helm. Pressures from conservatives and liberals were intense and the former could not have been anything but incensed by his unilateral renunciation of the Brezhnev doctrine. The rulers in the satellite nations of Eastern Europe were acutely aware that their remaining in office depended on the might of the Soviet armed forces. However, communism in the Soviet Union had pretty well outworn its “sell-by date” and, even in Gorbachev’s early years (1985-88), opposition from a conservative such as Ligachev had always to pay lip-service to an agreement with the goals of *perestroika*. Gorbachev also had cleverly appealed to and made use of public

⁵² Brown, The Gorbachev factor, p. 151.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

opinion, especially the Soviet intelligentsia. This latter segment within society had, it must be borne in mind, been a vital factor in both the February and October revolutions of 1917. Lenin himself had been a product of the Russian educated class. The Stalinist model of socialism had always been more comprehensively repressive than even the most reactionary Tsar, but by the mid-1980s its total lack of credibility among the peoples of this vast empire could not be either disguised or ignored.

Gorbachev had skillfully over the years undermined the position of the hardliners. An example of this, which Kotkin cites, is his September 1988 reorganisation of the Party Secretariat, where “Gorbachev created a series of separate, labour-intensive party commissions, each headed by a politburo member. Suddenly, there was no time for collective Secretariat meetings, or for its Union-wide supervisory functions of the still intact Union-wide party committees, whether for co-ordinating the elections or for a conspiracy against the general secretary.”⁵⁵ This enabled him to emasculate the power of the *apparatus*. Whilst this reinforced Gorbachev *vis-a-vis* the conservatives, it also undermined the Union, replacing it with a more federalised structure.

Kotkin defines the CPSU as “a conspiracy to take power, which it did in 1917”.⁵⁶ It had, since then preoccupied itself with entrenching that power and retaining unchallenged authority. It had trained its own specialists in various fields from the military to education and, even, engineering. Unfortunately, a bureaucracy of its own had also been put in place. Kotkin observes: “On the contrary, the bureaucracy of the party continued to grow alongside the bureaucracy of the state, and both performed essentially the same functions: management of society and the economy.”⁵⁷ This dilemma for the reformers is summarised by Strayer: “If the party was an obstacle to reform, could it also be the agent of reform? And if the party had to be weakened or bypassed in the pursuit of reform, what remained to hold the Soviet Union together?”⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Kotkin, *Armageddon averted*, p.77.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.78.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.79.

⁵⁸ Strayer, *Why did the Soviet Union collapse?*, p.94.

Certainly, the comparison with China is not entirely justified. It was the most populous country on Earth and, whilst it had been traumatised by Mao and the Cultural Revolution, it was far more agricultural and less developed industrially. There was great scope for increasing agriculture by abolishing the communes and reverting to private farming which, in turn, could finance the development of industry and commerce. Thus, the Chinese leadership did not face the same bureaucratic and entrenched vested interests which Gorbachev had to overcome. Thus, they could retain absolute Communist Party control, which Gorbachev could not (and would not) do. Gorbachev had to devise a strategy to weaken the political base of the conservatives in order to undertake a far more complex and intractable campaign of economic reform.

Gorbachev's main opponent, Ygor Ligachev, was unable to rally the hardliners within the CPSU because he lacked the courage to confront Gorbachev, for example, on the question of the Secretariat referred to earlier. But Ligachev was no man of steel. Kotkin writes: "But, if Ligachev had known back then that socialism and the Union were in danger, the bitter truth is that the person best positioned to do whatever was necessary to stop the general secretary lacked the wits and the stomach to do so."⁵⁹ The countervailing pressures from liberals were also a deterrent not to unseat Gorbachev. Yeltsin inspired far more loathing than the present General Secretary and, ultimately, President. Thus, rather than directing blame for what transpired during those six years of *perestroika*, he denounced his aides such as Alexander Yakovlev for hijacking the new policy with the deliberate intent of abolishing socialism and the Union. Ultimately, resistance from the Party was too uncertain and hesitant. Even had they succeeded in removing Gorbachev, the enormous problems facing the Soviet Union would have remained. This inability of his adversaries to halt or reverse *perestroika* was more due to the fact that, for once in Russian and Soviet history, a sea change had occurred in both its social and political life. The entire Soviet Union had been set on a journey whose immediate effects, to the contemporary populace were unknown, but whose ultimate goal was the creation of a rational economic

⁵⁹ Kotkin, Armageddon averted, p.82.

mechanism which would, hopefully, improve the circumstances of everyone. We now know that decades, not years, would have been required to achieve this goal.

CHAPTER 4

The rise of militant nationalism in the Soviet republics.

4.1. The collapse of the “outer empire”

This chapter will examine the two major related problems that afflicted the Soviet Union during the late 1980s and early 1990s. These were the drastic rearrangement of the strategic status quo, during this period, where the previous buffer zone of satellite states in Eastern Europe, all heavily based on the Soviet model, were all overthrown by popular revolutions which were even encouraged by Gorbachev. This in turn, secondly, released a Pandora's box of nationalistic expectations within the Soviet Union itself, a factor which was to lead to its unintended disintegration and replacement with fifteen successor states.

Thus it is necessary to sketch the background of the collapse of the “outer Empire” in Eastern Europe which constituted the Soviet zone of influence since the end of the Second World War. Essentially, these nations had been mere client states and their populations were sealed off from the West through the “Iron Curtain.” The major focus of this chapter will be the “inner empire” of the constituent republics which comprised the USSR. These republics were, in reality, the inheritance which was derived from the 1917 revolution and had all formed part of the Tsarist Empire which Lenin and his Bolsheviks had consolidated into the world's first communist state.

It is of paramount significance to stress that the tumultuous events in Eastern Europe already referred to, and particularly the advent of democracy, had a dramatic impact on the Soviet Union. This is graphically illustrated by the events in the three Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia which had enjoyed independent status between the two World Wars but which had been forcibly incorporated into the USSR in 1940 by Stalin. The advent of *glasnost* in particular had provided a new political framework for these suppressed peoples. They had observed the advent of political freedom in the Warsaw Pact nations and had, not surprisingly, drawn the relevant parallels with their own situations.

Gorbachev had, after all, voluntarily renounced the Brezhnev doctrine and had refused to intervene even to save the Honecker regime in East Germany and prevent German reunification. The Baltic leaders and populations reasoned that their cause was equally just and they, too, were victims of Soviet aggression.

Poland had tested the waters of Gorbachev's tolerance of allowing the Solidarity trade union (avowedly anti-communist) to assume power in that nation. Popular protests had brought down, not only the East German government, but the so-called 'velvet revolution' had also overthrown the Czechoslovak regime. Hungary and Bulgaria had achieved a democratic transition through negotiation and a bloody popular uprising, supported by the army, had overthrown the odious government of Ceausescu in Rumania.

These rapid changes in the status quo in Eastern Europe and the subsequent disintegration of the USSR were, in the eyes of many observers, the most significant events to occur in the second half of the twentieth century. The willingness of Gorbachev to make surprising concessions to the West had surprised political analysts. Particularly his decision not to put any serious obstacle in the way of the reunification of the two German states was of enormous significance. This made an important impact because Germany had always possessed a great psychological value to the citizens of the USSR. The defeat of Nazi Germany and the traumatic memories of the "Great Patriotic War" were the one major achievement of an entire generation of Russians who had little else to take pride in. The major role of the West German government of Chancellor Helmut Kohl in soothing the fears of the Soviet public while remaining firmly committed to the project of a united Germany maintaining its membership of Nato, brought about a realisation that the old Soviet inflexibility no longer existed. Within the USSR many peoples, particularly in the Baltics, were determined to seize their historical chance. Anything within the political sphere was now possible. This new reality was reinforced by *glasnost* and *perestroika* which had done so much to empower Soviet public opinion.

Once the genie of national aspirations for independence was out of the bottle, events within the Soviet Union proceeded to occur at a bewildering pace.

The coup de grace which greatly accelerated its demise was the 1991 coup attempt, the amateurish failure of which hastened the immediate de iure independence of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, which was then recognised by all nations, including the Soviet Union. The coup attempt did not really surprise most observers at the time. There were many major figures in the military and security establishment who were stunned and outraged by the overnight loss of the post-war empire which had solidified the status of the Soviet Union as a superpower, able to project its military and strategic influence world-wide. This development had been tolerated, albeit very reluctantly, but the open manifestation of both separatist tendencies and the simultaneous outbreak of inter-ethnic strife within the USSR's borders raised the spectre of disintegration of the multi-national state quite startlingly. Gorbachev was most aware of the looming danger and it is ironic that his very attempt to negotiate a new Union treaty was the pretext for the failed putsch to occur.

4.2. Ethnic conflict in the Soviet Republics

But what was the Soviet Union? Why was it such a contradiction, being militarily powerful and, yet, at the same time so fragile? The Soviet Union reflected a wide variety of demographic diversity, with the three Slavic nations of Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia being the most heavily populated and industrialised. For the reformers, the most intractable and explosive region was clearly Transcaucasia. Three republics existed in this area, being Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The latter two entities had, since 1988, become embroiled in an insoluble conflict over the Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan of Nagorno-Karabakh. It had been made part of Azerbaijan during the Stalin era and had always generated a grave sense of injustice among the Armenian people. *Glasnost* played a vital role in bringing this issue to the surface, and it was only in February 1988 that the long suppressed feelings of antagonism, which had their seeds of germination in history, language and religion, came to boiling point. The worst aspect of the situation, writes Keep, was that "it was in practice

administered from Baku, treated as a colony, and neglected in the provision of electric power, roads and social services.”¹ Whilst Azerbaijani nationalism was essentially a secular phenomenon, although there were individual Islamic extremists, the Azeris looked at the half a million Christian Armenians² in the enclave with grave suspicion. Because of *glasnost*, the Armenian United National party was able to operate openly, gain widespread support, and agitate for this enclave to become once again part of Armenia.

This led to huge demonstrations in the capital of Armenia (Yerevan) followed by rampant inter-ethnic violence, with massacres of Armenians in the industrial centre of Sumgait, near Baku which was the Azerbaijani capital. Retaliatory massacres of Azeris in both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh soon led to a serious refugee problem on both sides. Clearly, to the opponents of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the consequences of relaxing the central government’s grip on the smaller republics proved to be disastrous. Hardliners had always argued the dangers of allowing freedom of expression of nationalist sentiment.

Gorbachev realised that he had to act swiftly when he was faced with near open warfare between two Soviet republics. His approach was commendable and very rare in Russian history. Rather than resorting to the familiar brutal response of sending in an overwhelming military force backed by tanks to crush the outbreak of unrest, he decided, firstly, to try the path of negotiations. Once that approach had failed, he opted to institute direct rule of Nagorno-Karabakh from Moscow. Brown comments that “although this could be only a temporary expedient, it was one which produced more favourable conditions for the inhabitants of the enclave than they had endured earlier”.³

Clearly, this conflict had long term historical roots and, as mentioned earlier, owed a lot to differences in religion between the two peoples. Thus, the Armenians remain amongst the oldest nations to embrace Christianity, whilst the Azeris are Turkic Muslims. The former nation were, along with the Georgians, a Christian island in an Islamic sea. This sense of encirclement gave rise to a deep

¹ John L.H.Keep, The last of the empires, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995), p.365.

² Ibid.

³ Brown, The Gorbachev factor, p.263.

sense of grievance, anxiety and vulnerability and the Armenians had historically welcomed the Orthodox Russian presence, particularly during the nineteenth century. The latter provided an invaluable counterweight to the Islamic Ottoman Turks. The memory of the genocide inflicted during the First World War by the rulers of that empire when an estimated one million Armenians were killed was always a factor that the people remembered. The conflict in 1988 only compounded the difficulties into which *perestroika* had run. The institution of an economic blockade of Armenia by Azerbaijan inflicted even more problems on the Soviet economy. Owing to the logic of central planning, Armenia was the sole source of certain vital products, for example tyres, for the entire USSR.

Martin McCauley remarks on the serious political difficulties facing Gorbachev. The outbreak of rampant conflict in the Caucasus region not only confronted him and his fellow reformers with an insoluble dilemma, but his hardline opponents within the Politburo, KGB and military, such as Ygor Ligachev were demanding strong action to snuff out the conflict by the Kremlin: "We must bring in the troops, dismantle factories, dismiss the Party organisations and soviet executive committees and establish order", the latter is quoted as saying.⁴

In December, 1988 Gorbachev met deputies from Armenia and Azerbaijan and outlined to them the stark reality facing them. He told them: "We are on the brink of disaster."⁵ The dilemma facing Gorbachev was that both sides were intransigent and any concession by Moscow would greatly embitter the other party to the dispute. Keep observes on the predicament of the central authorities: "if they conceded the principle that a territory's administrative status should be determined solely by its ethnic make-up, scarcely any border in the Union would remain unchallenged."⁶ Whilst the turmoil in the Caucasus was the most troubling problem facing the Soviet leadership at that time, potentially dangerous outbreaks of nationalism based on ethnic solidarity were multiplying. Thus the

⁴ McCauley, Gorbachev, p.120.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Keep, The last of the empires, p.366.

open resurgence of nationalist sentiments in republics such as Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova all had the potential to tear the Soviet Union apart. Georgia itself contained non-Georgian nationalities such as Abkhazians and South Ossettians and the prospect of further outbreaks of conflict were immensely alarming to the leadership of the USSR. Abkhazia was problematic because the population of their autonomous region only consisted of 18 per cent Abkhazians, whilst Georgians numbered 46 per cent and Russians and Armenians 15 per cent each.⁷ The Georgian nationalists who demanded independence called for the inclusion of Abkhazia within their state. Ukraine was the second largest republic within the Soviet Union with a population of 42 347 387 people (1979 census)⁸ and also possessed a large and economically significant Russian minority. Moldovans, on the other hand, were ethnically related to Rumanians and the desire of linking up with their western neighbour was also a factor for the reformers to guard against. The potential for Islamic militancy and self-assertiveness in Central Asia was immense and potentially more threatening to the Slavic core of the empire. The need to balance all these competing dangers was extremely difficult, bearing in mind Gorbachev's firm resolution not to use force to maintain the Union. His conservative opponents, particularly the security establishment, had no such reservations about resorting to heavy-handed brutality to deal with dissent.

Thus, compounding the situation facing Gorbachev was the brutal massacre of nineteen demonstrators in Tbilisi, capital of Georgia, in April 1989. This loss of life was exactly what Gorbachev had been striving to avoid, particularly as it would both create martyrs for the nationalist cause and lead to increasing bitterness among the general population. Western nations would also become more skeptical of Gorbachev's credentials as a reformer, further jeopardising the prospect of economic aid to assist *perestroika*. To make matters worse, the Georgian Communist Party was dominated at the top of the structure by a corrupt and dictatorial leadership, a reality which had been present even in the Brezhnev era. Whilst such illegal activities had been tolerated in the

⁷ Ibid., p.368.

⁸ Shirin Akiner, Islamic peoples of the Soviet Union, (London, Kegan Paul International, 1983), p.44.

past, the mushrooming of opposition groupings, movements and parties owing to the reforms of *glasnost* had brought about increasing demonstrations by disaffected citizens. On the night of 8-9 April 1989 an astonishingly brutal attack on peaceful protestors, conducted by Soviet troops using poison gas, left nineteen people dead and hundreds injured. As it happened, both Gorbachev and his foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze (who strongly supported his reforms), had only arrived in Moscow at midnight prior to the tragedy, from a foreign visit. This was significant because there had existed a leadership vacuum which was filled by hardliners, particularly Ygor Ligachev and KGB chief Viktor Chebrikov. They were the individuals to blame and Gorbachev was exonerated from all responsibility for the massacre.

Brown assesses the importance of these events. "The events in Tbilisi of April 1989 thus demonstrated that the harsh use of force could in the new climate of raised expectations and aroused civic courage, produce the opposite effect from that intended by the Soviet authorities."⁹ It certainly stimulated a desire for independence which had hitherto been latent and viewed as unrealistic in pre-Gorbachev days. It threatened to open a Pandora's box as there were major complications with smaller nationalities within the Georgian Republic. Thus, the desire of the Abkhazians and South Ossetians to remain within the Soviet Union and opt out of any breakaway of the Georgians from the USSR clearly illustrates the potential disaster which could unfold. Brown emphasises the enormity of the problem that faced Gorbachev: "The last thing Gorbachev wanted was to lose any part of the Soviet Union following the loss - as his domestic enemies on the right certainly saw it - of Eastern Europe."¹⁰

His survival in office despite the geo-strategic loss of a cordon sanitaire of buffer states acquired after the loss of so much blood on the battlefields of the Second World War, and their replacements by non-communist states, surprised many observers. But the heartland of the Soviet Union was to provide the crucial litmus test. "Yet he believed that if he were to stand idly by while parts of the

⁹ Brown, *The Gorbachev factor*, p.265.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.267.

Soviet Union dropped off, he would be forgiven neither by his contemporaries nor by future generations of Russians”,¹¹ argues the author. In retrospect, these were not unreasonable fears, as problems multiplied in previously compliant regions such as Ukraine and Central Asia. Thus, the refusal to allow the three Baltic states to secede from the Soviet Union was understandable. This was despite the belated admission of the authorities that their occupation and incorporation by Stalin in 1940, in terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, had been illegal. The sensitivity of this issue was so great that even the United States was careful not to place too much pressure on him over it.

The Ukraine had a long and very close association, dating back several centuries, with Russia. Ukrainians also were fellow Slavs and the overwhelming majority were Orthodox Christians. They constituted a significant demographic influence and the estimated ten million ethnic Russians within this republic were concentrated in its eastern industrialised region. Moreover, many Ukrainians also lived outside the borders of the republic. The Ukrainians had always possessed a somewhat ambivalent attitude to their close relationship with their much larger neighbour. A strong and abiding desire existed on the part of many Ukrainians to assert their own national identity as a separate nation distinct from Russia. For some, acceptance of being part of the Soviet Union prevailed, but many others yearned for real independence. Nationalist dissidents had been routinely harassed by the KGB which had maintained a tight stranglehold over any manifestations of such tendencies. Economically, Ukraine was completely intertwined with the Soviet Union. It was, perhaps, the most crucial agricultural region in the entire empire, being endowed with the rich soils of the black earth belt which had always provided rich yields - a kind of granary on which the USSR depended. It had experienced among the worst excesses of Stalin's collectivisation of agriculture. The terrible ideologically induced famine of the early 1930s had, observers overwhelmingly agree, claimed the lives of several million peasants and their families, a powerful grievance against both Marxism-Leninism and the Soviet state which it had spawned. Being highly

¹¹ Ibid., p.268.

industrialised also made it the source of many of the USSR's industries and its huge demographic size did give it a considerable leverage in Soviet politics. Climate also contributed to its crucial significance to the Communist rulers. Despite the vastness of the USSR, its only warm water port remained Odessa, situated on the southern Ukrainian coast and its access through the narrow Bosphorous strait was of incalculable strategic significance to a superpower with global ambitions.

The establishment of popular fronts in the various republics after 1985 was a direct consequence of *glasnost*. Their proliferation, with examples such as *Sajudis* in Lithuania and *Rukh* in Ukraine had allowed vital breathing space for nationalists in the subject nations of the USSR. Those behind their creation did not, initially, envisage as their goal (in the case of *Rukh* in particular) the establishment of an independent Ukrainian state. The original goal was, at least ostensibly, to popularise, celebrate and indeed promote Ukrainian language and culture which had for so long been submerged by that of its far more powerful Russian neighbour - even in Tsarist times - and provide a rallying point for all Ukrainians. However, many of their people were content and even proud of their contribution to the building of the Soviet Union which was, at least in the military field, one of only two superpowers on the planet and a leader in scientific and, especially, space research.

Yet the seeds of agitation for independence had been present for many decades. The advent of *glasnost* encouraged the articulation of dissident nationalist sentiments, and had the particular effect of transforming the political situation within a mere few years. The iron fisted approach of Gorbachev's predecessors, which had ruthlessly crushed all forms of 'bourgeois nationalism' as relics of the pre-socialist era, had confined supporters of independence for the nation to either prison or psychiatric hospitals. Indeed, not only nationalists but also any dissident who questioned the validity of the Soviet system and, in particular, Marxist-Leninist values was liable to suffer the same fate. This was the case in all republics. The USSR was internationally condemned for its abuse of psychiatry and had even been expelled from relevant world bodies for such

practices. *Rukh* played a crucial role in providing a focus for Ukrainians to have hope in a more hopeful and prosperous future. The tumultuous events in Eastern Europe in 1989 illustrated the fact that now, perhaps, anything was possible.

Gorbachev has to be commended for his commitment to human rights in the face of the outbreak of ethnic nationalisms and conflicts. The security establishment, conservative critics within the Party, and even certain Russian nationalist elements demanded a harsh crackdown. His hardline critics viewed him as indecisive and too naïve in his belief that the union could be held together without recourse to a brutal crackdown. He did, however, make an attempt to preserve a federation of some sort with greater powers for the republican periphery. Lack of enthusiasm by 1990-91 led him to dilute this to a confederation, and although the three Baltic republics refused to retain any links with the Soviet Union, he did gain the support of some important republican leaders. Unfortunately, his enemies on the right of the Soviet political spectrum saw the impending disintegration of their treasured seventy year old Leninist legacy occurring before their very eyes and believed that Gorbachev was going too far in his attempts to placate the republics. Brown makes this astute and telling observation: “The greatest machinery of government in the world would not, of course, have resolved the fundamental political conflicts within Soviet society. At some point the transformation of such a long established Communist system into a non-Communist system... and the threat of the breakup of the multi-national state, itself an unintended consequence of the democratization of a highly authoritarian regime, were bound to lead to a showdown.”¹²

Gorbachev’s turn to the right in the winter months of 1990-91 was induced by the relentless pressure from orthodox communist conservatives. He was compelled to retreat from his bold reform plans for Soviet society and economy and was forced to hold reform in abeyance, at least temporarily. It appears to have been a desperate attempt to placate the hardliners who were exerting such tremendous pressure on him. Brown comments on this and argues that “whatever criticism can be levelled at Gorbachev concerning the most

¹² Ibid., p.285.

disappointing years of his leadership - from October 1990 to March 1991 - has to be tempered by amazement that he was able to carry with him so long, and however reluctantly, the defenders of the old order. It is hardly surprising that matters came to a head when the very existence of Soviet statehood was at issue. By 1991 even the arguments over what kind of political or economic system was being created became subordinate to the question of what kind of union, if any, could be preserved.”¹³

Two particular regions require further discussion. These are, firstly, the Russian Federation which now had its own parallel government and political structure under its newly elected President Boris Yeltsin and which constituted the very core of the USSR, and, secondly, Central Asia, very much a backward region with very strong nomadic and Islamic roots which set it apart from the rest of European Russia. The ethnic make-up of Central Asia was complicated by the intrusion of several million Russian Slavic settlers into the area. The Soviet authorities had, since the revolution, encouraged the migration of these people into the region with the goal of building up socialism in Central Asia. The propaganda of the Communists had always made much of the activities of settlers to the area. On the other hand, it also served to strengthen the control of Moscow over Central Asia and retard the growth of nationalist or religious sentiments there. The phenomenon was most pronounced in Kazakhstan where Russians outnumbered the indigenous population and were concentrated mainly in the urban centres.

4.3. The changing position of Russia within the Soviet Union

The Russian Federation had often been viewed by many observers, both Russian and foreign, as being coterminous with the Soviet Union. Thus, it was not uncommon to many Russians to view other languages with considerable disdain and they refused to learn them. This so-called Great Russian chauvinism had been encouraged since the Stalinist era and, quite naturally, provoked

¹³ Ibid.

considerable resentment among other nationalities. As the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic) constituted approximately three quarters of this vast Union, possessed the dominant language of science and education, and numbered over half the entire population this reality is perhaps not surprising. But many Russians viewed their status from a considerably different perspective. They possessed fewer national rights than the other fourteen republics, it was argued. The example of the fact that Russia, alone among the Soviet constituent republics, did not possess its own Academy of Sciences, was often raised. However, Russians in particular, did tend to dominate the top leadership roles and executive positions in the entire USSR and, prior to *glasnost*, there had been felt little need to establish its own parallel structures. This changed very dramatically in the late 1980s and early 1990s as more radical reformers sought to establish a political power base outside the Soviet centre and it culminated in the direct popular election of the Russian Federation's first President, Boris Yeltsin, in June 1991. The roots of this development lay in the increasing loss of authority at the Soviet centre where there existed a perception that brute force and intimidation of political opponents was discounted by Gorbachev and his fellow reformers. Another factor in Russia's determination to assert its own identity had its origin in the political ambitions of Yeltsin, who had been humiliated by Gorbachev - he had been expelled from the Politburo of the CPSU and publicly berated by the latter figure for openly criticising the slow pace of change in Gorbachev's first four years as General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party - and he assumed the mantle of more radical reform. A powerful Russia offered a great opportunity for him to advance his career. Yet, the path of reform and the rise to prominence of a Russian nationalist movement "was bound to take a different form than it did in other union republics, where elites had a more readily identifiable common foe, usually although not invariably the 'imperial' power, against which they could rally popular support."¹⁴ The feeling among many Russians was that their nationality was unfairly blamed by other ethnic groups for the actions of past Soviet leaders and many believed, perhaps rightly, that they had indeed been

¹⁴ Keep, The last of the empires, p.384.

unfairly treated in the allocation of resources from the Soviet centre. The position of the Russians who lived in other republics was also a source of concern. Keep asserts: "Many of these expatriates - over 25 million, according to some calculations - had gone there unwillingly. Did they deserve to be seen as colonialist *pieds-noirs*? Whether employed as cadres or as simple workers and farmers (in Kazakhstan, for example), they had laboured for the common good. If abuses had been committed, surely the blame for them should be placed on the makers of imperial policy, not its executants? There should be no question of collective guilt."¹⁵ Russia was not the Soviet Union, and despite the periods in history when attempts were made to glorify and even Russify the minorities, its status was rather a part of a much larger whole. The rise of Yeltsin and other movements, such as *pamyat*, must be seen in this light.

Yeltsin's dramatic rise to such a prominent position created something of an intractable dilemma for Gorbachev. The former came to be a major rival for the Soviet leader, who did not enjoy the legitimacy of a popular mandate directly chosen as leader from the electorate. The ascendancy of Russia as a political entity distinct from the Soviet Union also accelerated the advance of the cause of liberal democracy. Thus, Yeltsin was, for example, prepared to defy Gorbachev and the authority of the CPSU and issue a decree recognising the independence of Lithuania. Clearly, considerable confusion existed as to which authority, Soviet or Russian, was supreme and who exactly should be obeyed.

Not surprisingly, Yeltsin and his team of radical democrats were, even more than Gorbachev, complete anathema to the right-wing conservative forces within the Kremlin leadership. Brown comments on the conflict between the two leaders. "A huge impetus to the ultimate breakup of the Soviet Union had been given by the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation in June, 1990, some two weeks after Yeltsin became its chairman, when it declared political sovereignty and the supremacy of Russian law over union legislation."¹⁶ On Yeltsin's aims,

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Brown, The Gorbachev factor, p.287.

Brown writes: "Yeltsin's increasing rejection of the union had been based not only on the more radical policies which he was prepared to pursue but, still more, on the fact that the all-union authorities and Gorbachev in particular, stood between him and full power in Russia, including the symbolically important occupancy of the Kremlin."¹⁷ The reality was that national politics had been very much personalised. Gorbachev remained the incumbent authority and he was very much an urbane, reasoning and sophisticated individual. His rival was a highly ambitious populist who possessed simultaneously a burning desire for revenge. There was indeed an element of opportunism in his actions. The fact that both men were prominent reformers became obscured by the fierce power struggle between them.

Increasingly, Gorbachev came to accept that the only prospect of halting the process of disintegration of the USSR with new problems arising in the various republics was to alter the Union between them, which had seemed so omnipotent in pre-Gorbachev days, into a much looser confederal structure. The Novo - Ogarevo process was designed by Gorbachev to achieve just this devolution of power to the republics which would then be sovereign entities. The name Novo-Ogarevo was derived from the country house near Moscow where the leaders of nine union republics, including Russia, met to discuss exactly what kind of union, political and economic, could be preserved from the rump of what remained of the Soviet Union. It must be noted that all three Baltic states refused to have any dealings with these discussions as they were determined to reassert their independence from the USSR. However, the actual meaning of the term "sovereign" was left to be somewhat ambiguous, and it was hoped by the Soviet leader that such concessions would pacify the demands of the periphery whilst at least preserving the essence of the USSR as a full participant in international affairs. It must be stressed that the powers of the centre would be severely curtailed. This dilution of Soviet power inspired panic among conservatives and the signing of the agreement was to lead directly to the disastrous August, 1991 coup attempt. The failed coup and its immediate political

¹⁷ Ibid.

consequences for the Soviet Union will be further examined in the last section of this chapter.

The one region of the Soviet Union which has not, as yet, been fully explored in this analysis is that of Central Asia. In pre-Soviet days it had all generally been referred to as Turkestan and it happened to be the last region to come under the authority and control of the Tsars. The Bolsheviks had divided it into several different ethnically based republics, with the largest of them being Kazakhstan. Two particularly striking features of Soviet Central Asia were, firstly its sheer vastness and backward nomadic character and, secondly, the all-embracing prevalence of Islam which united the whole area and gave it its distinctive feature compared with the European Orthodox Christian empire which had colonised it. Soviet rule, ostensibly designed by Lenin to liberate it, had proved to be both disastrous - the death of 2 million Kazakh nomads during the Stalinist collectivisation of agriculture is certainly the worst example - whilst it also possessed certain progressive and beneficial aspects. The two features which spring to mind are massively improved literacy and the enhancement of the position of women in society and economy. The status of Islam did suffer from the avowedly atheistic communists and the practice of it was actively discouraged. There also was, as mentioned previously, a huge influx of Slavic settlers - predominantly Russian - into the region, a piece of social engineering actively encouraged by consecutive Soviet governments. Their presence was heavily concentrated in urban centres such as Alma-Ata in Kazakhstan and Tashkent in Uzbekistan.

The most prominent characteristics of the Soviet Central Asian economy were its relative underdevelopment vis-à-vis European regions of the Union and its dependence on a mono-culture of cotton, much of it irrigated, which supplied the Soviet Union with most of its needs of this product. The rapidly growing indigenous population, according to various observers, constituted a demographic time bomb for the future of the USSR. Whilst the Slavic core of the Soviet Union had a worryingly low birth rate for economic and social planners, all attempts to encourage the surplus work force to migrate to European

areas of the Soviet Union where the demand for labour was most pressing had failed lamentably – it appears Central Asians saw little prospect of improving their lives by doing so - and the region was very definitely a headache for Soviet planners. Huge energy resources, most notably those of oil and natural gas, promised rich dividends in economic terms and it was hoped that there would be no need in the future to continue to subsidise this region.

4.4. Islamic fundamentalism and the war in Afghanistan

Another major factor which concerned the Soviet government was the possible spread of the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism to this region from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. The USSR had been involved in propping up militarily an unpopular Marxist-Leninist government in Afghanistan, where a plethora of Islamic movements were waging a *jihad* or holy war against both the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul and Soviet forces since 1979. Once again Gorbachev was faced with a difficult dilemma. It was necessary to counterbalance the expansion of Islamic militancy into the atheist heartland of the Soviet Union with the rising level of unpopularity of continuing a war which could not be won on the battlefield. The rising number of Soviet casualties made the conflict more urgent once *glasnost* made Soviet public opinion count. It was the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party who played a major role in bringing an end to the involvement of the Union in this conflict. Brown writes: "What is not really in doubt is the decisive role of Gorbachev in ending the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan. Asked who had the final say, Yakovlev replied: 'Mikhail Sergeyevich (Gorbachev) - of course he had the final say. Enough hesitation, he said, the troops must be withdrawn - that's all there is to it. They must be withdrawn.'"¹⁸

The strongest factor militating against a rapid explosion of Islamic fundamentalist sentiment in Soviet Central Asia was, firstly, the near total dependence of this region on the European Slavic centre - especially insofar as the

¹⁸ Ibid., p.235.

economy was concerned - and, secondly, the reality that Soviet rule had created new elites who were able to dispense patronage with the assistance of the huge Russian *nomenklatura*. Such a class of leadership had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and probably took an even firmer stance and action against religious dissent. Central Asia was not, politically, as dangerous a threat to Soviet rule as many Western observers and commentators had predicted it would be.

4.5. The secession of the Baltic states

Certainly, the three Baltic states and the Transcaucasus republics were far more of an immediate danger to the maintenance of the Soviet Union as a distinct political and legal entity under international law. Gorbachev had been placed in an extremely difficult position in, particularly, Lithuania. Ultimately, all attempts at balancing reformists with hardliners within the Party, military and security establishment was impossible. This was the case within any medium to long-term strategy. Besides internal disagreement, there remained the pressures of the Western governments and media who would soon cease their support for Gorbachev if any brutal crackdown occurred in these three republics. The attempts to persuade the Lithuanian public to reject secession and independence, which had been declared in March 1990, did not meet with any success. His counter-strategy was to employ the stick of an economic blockade by the Union for three months and the promulgation of a Law on Secession in April 1990. The new legislation stipulated that a minimum of two-thirds of a republic's electorate had to approve independence, a five-year transition period had to be waited for and, finally, the Soviet legislature also had to approve it. The scarcely disguised aim of the law was to make secession impossible. Unfortunately, certain elements within the military took matters into their own hands as the leader of the USSR increasingly became a captive of conservatives during the winter of 1990-91. The assault by Soviet troops on the Vilnius television centre on 13 January 1991 killed fourteen Lithuanian civilians and caused widespread

anger and bitterness in the Baltic. Miller observes the following: "It was an attempt to use force against an elected government, and to establish the precedent that some political organisations but not others had access to armed force. It was thus an attempt to reverse the CPSU disestablishment of March 1990. And the attempt was known in advance to some in Moscow."¹⁹ Whilst Gorbachev was blamed for this brutal attack, Miller doubts whether this is justified. He writes: "There is unlikely to have been a direct or coordinated plot to reimpose pro-Soviet governments in the Baltic; rather a climate of fear and confusion was encouraged, in which it may have been hoped, supporters of non-communist governments would have been cowed (or provoked), opposition to them strengthened, and freebooters could seize their chance. Gorbachev would seem to have been consenting to this process - and among the freebooters were figures who reappeared in the August coup."²⁰

In Latvia's capital, Riga, there was further bloodshed when Ministry of the Interior troops killed four people and matters appeared to be reaching a highly uncertain and potentially dangerous climax. Both Latvia and Estonia contained a significantly larger proportion of ethnic Russians in their populations and an emotional response of savage repression of the indigenous Baltic inhabitants could have tilted the balance of power in favour of Gorbachev's anti-reformist opponents. Public opinion in Russia could also have been changed in support of the latter as people might feel that their fellow Russians were in danger of being reduced to alien nationals and second class citizens in states which had, for fifty years, been part of the Soviet Union.

The winter of 1990-91 marked a distinct period when Gorbachev became increasingly obviously a captive of conservative elements within both the Party and security establishment. This has been observed in developments in the aforementioned Baltic republics. From March 1991 this evident tilt to the right was replaced by a return to trusting the advice of his most reliable reformist advisers. Brown remarks that "the upshot was that Gorbachev

¹⁹ Miller, *Mikhail Gorbachev and the end of Soviet power*, p.173.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.174.

decided to take the initiative once again and embark on what he called the 'Novo-Ogarevo process.'²¹ This was, in essence, an agreement signed at the President of the USSR's country house on 23 April 1991 with the leaders of nine Union-Republics, including Yeltsin. Miller asserts that "implicit in this was recognition by the Union administration of the sovereignty of the Union-Republics; and that the federation inaugurated by the Union Treaty should be a very weak one in which the Centre would retain only a minimum of power."²²

For such a process or agreement to have any chance of success he required the support of the major participants in the drama, the Russian Federation (dominated by his arch-antagonist Yeltsin) and at least the participation of Ukraine and Kazakhstan. The Novo-Ogarevo agreement offered the only hope for the continuation of some form of Union (rather more a confederation) but it, paradoxically, triggered the 19-21 August 1991 coup attempt. Brown asserts that "four drafts were published - in November 1990 and in March, June, and August 1991"²³ He stipulates that "each version devolved more power to the republics than its predecessor, and it was the last version - published on 14 August - and the imminent signing of it on 20 August which determined the timing of the failed putsch".²⁴ The most important players in the drama of the process at Novo-Ogarevo were Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Both were under intense pressure from their respective constituencies, a reality illustrated by the comment of a hardline conservative in the Soviet Politburo. Brown quotes him as saying: "What have you done, boys.... You have thrown away power, and with it the Union."²⁵

4.6. The August coup and collapse of the Soviet Union.

The attempted coup of 19-21 August, 1991 and its disastrous failure delivered the final fatal blow to the USSR. All the major conspirators were senior members of Gorbachev's cabinet. They included his Prime Minister Pavlov, Vice-President

²¹ Brown, The Gorbachev factor, p.286.

²² Miller, Mikhail Gorbachev and the end of Soviet power, p.175.

²³ Brown, The Gorbachev factor, p.287.

²⁴ Ibid.

Yanaev, minister of State Security and KGB chief Kryuchkov, and Defence minister Yazov, all personally appointed by Gorbachev. The main catalyst for the attempted putsch was the imminent signing of a new Union treaty on 20 August which precipitated the action on 19 August. What does seem clear is that the conspirators viewed Yeltsin and his radical followers as the real enemy and had hoped to win over Gorbachev to support their plan. Keep sketches the dilemma facing them: "They knew what they disliked - the Union treaty, the new Party programme, market economics- but were less sure of what they wanted. How far was the clock to be put back: to 1988, to 1984, or to 1953? The second date is the most plausible",²⁶ he contends. Their action of staging the coup was hoped to be presented as legal and in accordance with the Soviet constitution but, unfortunately for them and of crucial significance to its subsequent failure, Gorbachev would not support them. He was on vacation in the Crimea and, on August 18 at 4:50 p.m., a delegation of the plotters approached him. They claimed to be representing the State Committee for the State of Emergency and demanded he support their actions or resign. Gorbachev refused to acquiesce to their demand and, writes Coleman, his response was: "You are nothing but adventurists and traitors, and you will pay for this. Only those who want to commit suicide can now suggest a totalitarian regime in the country. You are pushing it to civil war."²⁷

The response of the plotters was to place Gorbachev and his family under house arrest. The lame claim that the President was ill and needed to be relieved of his responsibilities fooled nobody, especially the public and the new democratic leaders. Yeltsin led the resistance and declared the Emergency Committee illegal, a call for a general strike was made, and large crowds gathered around the Russian parliament building, the so-called White House. The dramatic presence of strong public resistance to the coup unnerved the plotters. Despite the fact that they could have broken the resistance around Yeltsin, they decided to attempt a way out of the situation and sought an audience with Gorbachev.

²⁵ Ibid., p.289.

²⁶ Keep, The last of the empires, p.402.

²⁷ Coleman, The decline and fall of the Soviet empire, p.344.

Keep asserts that “apparently orders were given to storm the building, but some units...refused to obey.”²⁸ The result was that, given their indecisiveness and lack of nerve, the coup collapsed.

Whilst the credit for the resistance and ultimate collapse of the putsch must go to Yeltsin, the initial refusal by Gorbachev to co-operate and his decision to stick to his democratic principles ensured that such a hesitant and amateurish attempt to reverse six years of *glasnost* and *perestroika* would fail. Had there not been so many people prepared to defend their new liberties, the coup may ultimately have succeeded and again set back both Russian and Soviet history.

The failure of the attempt at reversing reform led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The rebellious Baltic states declared their full independence and even Gorbachev recognised this new reality, as did the international community. The nationalities question could not be resolved within the context of an imploding dysfunctional economy. Moreover, the desire of other nationalities to be free from Soviet power and the totalitarian control it had exerted for seventy years, proved to be too powerful to resist once the door to freedom had been slightly opened. Gorbachev had striven to save the Soviet Union as, ironically, the coup plotters had. Both had failed and on 31 December 1991 the USSR ceased to exist as a sovereign entity under international law.

²⁸ Keep, The last of the empires, p.403.

CONCLUSION

In assessing Gorbachev's bold experiment in both democratising the Soviet Union and transforming its economy, one can conclude a decade after the collapse of the empire that he did succeed in attaining the former goal but only at a very high cost. The USSR no longer exists as a sovereign entity and its major successor state, the Russian Federation plays a much more limited and circumscribed role in international affairs. This remains a source of profound regret and even anger among many former Soviet citizens. In addition, the collapse of the extensive social welfare system, which somewhat ameliorated the constricted lives of the Soviet citizens, has brought about widespread poverty for the bulk of many people.

The introduction of, initially, *perestroika* had been welcomed by many people because it was believed that it would bring Soviet citizens a standard of living more in line with the rest of the developed world. The attempt to stay the course led to what hostile opponents and skeptical committed socialist ideologues had feared - the collapse of the entire command economy and the reintroduction of capitalism.

The effect of drastic economic change, of an extent certainly not envisaged by Gorbachev and his enthusiastic team of reformers, was and remains today, extremely widespread. Thus, the Baltic republics transition to independent status, has considerably benefited them when measured in both political and economic terms. These states, however, were only regaining what had been so cruelly snatched from them by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and they were also closer culturally to Western Europe than the other successor states. The Russian Federation, with its unparalleled natural resources, of which oil and natural gas are the most significant, has managed to cope with Yeltsin's painful transition to the market. However, life has become exceedingly grim for the remainder of what was the periphery of the Soviet Union. Indeed, the Soviet obsession with central planning had locked all republics into a tight network of inter-dependence. A suitable example is Central Asia, which had

survived on a mono-culture of cotton, but has suffered dearly for this in the post-Soviet era.

Gorbachev had envisaged the USSR being a more efficient and dynamic economy and society, well able to exploit the enormous riches of skilled and highly trained manpower which was one positive legacy of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately for the reformers, attempts at overhauling the creaking mechanism of the planned economy had the reverse effect of what had been intended. Thus, even during the Gorbachev era, the entire Soviet edifice unraveled. Shortages appeared in various sectors, while the continued overproduction of certain commodities, such as steel, became absurd once the normal logic of market economics began to be introduced.

More shocking to many people indoctrinated with the egalitarian ethos of Marxism-Leninism was the overt appearance of very sharp discrepancies in wealth among various strata of the population. Thus, certain opportunistic individuals and groups came to flaunt conspicuous wealth - the new oil czars are perhaps the best example of this phenomenon - whilst the majority of ordinary Soviet citizens found it an increasingly difficult task to sustain a meagre daily existence. Pensions and wages became worthless as the effects of rampant inflation came to be felt. Even unemployment became yet another feature of the *perestroika* years. After seventy years of guaranteed employment, albeit at a low level for most people, and being told exactly what to think, adjusting to the multiple responses of the new market economy was nigh impossible. It is thus not surprising that crime, including an openly operating Russian mafia, increasingly punctuated life in the Gorbachev era. For the bulk of Soviet citizens at this juncture in their history, especially in the short to medium term, the economic downside of *perestroika* in particular outweighed any tangible benefits of reform.

However the biggest positive aspect of reform for many people, both within the Soviet Union and in the subject nations of Eastern Europe, was independence for the fifteen Union republics of the USSR. For the former hapless victims of the machinations of the Yalta conference which had divided Europe along ideological lines, the opportunity to rejoin the political, cultural and

economic mainstream of the prosperous West was enthusiastically seized. The rapid reunification of Germany and the coming of democracy and freedom to countries such as Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia with limited violence – only Romania experienced a violent uprising - was an achievement for which Gorbachev was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990. The end of the Cold War and the destruction of the Stalinist model of government and command economy were Gorbachev's crowning achievements. Within the former Soviet Union, independence for long suppressed regions such as the Ukraine was greeted enthusiastically.

In addition, another positive aspect of Gorbachev's reforms was the introduction of democracy with all its ramifications. The goal of a law-based state was achieved, albeit imperfectly, and the broad mass of the population was liberated from fear. Thus the development of a vigorous open press which could challenge the Leninist orthodoxy has continued into Putin's independent Russia today. The end of political censorship could only expose the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of communism in its Soviet guise. The fact that the basic litmus test of democracy - government with the consent of the governed - was now established was to inspire many ordinary Russians to defy and ultimately to defeat the machinations of the coup plotters. Gorbachev's brave and comprehensive reforms resulted in the USSR having a totally transformed character from the society which had enabled Brezhnev to oust Krushchev in 1964. Democratic structures had been appropriated by the people and *glasnost* had exposed the crude falsehoods of Soviet propaganda.

The final freedom which must be briefly mentioned is the right to freedom of religion and conscience. Thus the disappearance of restrictions on the activities of the church, particularly the Orthodox faith, allowed it to regain at least some of its place in post-communist Russia. Other religions such as Islam and Buddhism also benefited from the liquidation of the atheist state which the Communist Party had sought so actively to establish.

A final assessment of this conclusion is that certainly *perestroika* and the introduction of the market brought serious and, in many cases severe

economic hardship to many citizens of the empire. This was particularly a feature of the years of transition. Counterbalancing this are the benefits of democratisation and liberalisation which proceeded far beyond Gorbachev's initial aims. Thus, any assessment of his successes must be qualified. An important question which has puzzled many historians is why the rapid demise of the Soviet Union occurred so relatively peacefully? Strayer asserts: "The August coup notwithstanding, the defenders of the established system, including an entrenched party elite, a fearsome KGB, and the military forces of a global superpower, put up an amazingly modest resistance against those who sought to end their power and their privileges."¹ He finds the answer in the transition of the USSR into "a corrupt and sloppy bureaucracy, full of cynicism and self-seeking."² Clearly, those who ran the Union had long since become complacent and certainly had little belief in the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. The effect of *glasnost* was to destroy their legitimacy in the eyes of the public and they lacked the determination to fight for power, especially with the economic implosion wrought by perestroika. The scenario which prevailed in the republics of the Soviet Union was a nightmare to any stout defender of it.

Brown makes this final comment on Gorbachev: "It is to Gorbachev's lasting credit that when he found that reform led to resistance from all the vested interests which it threatened, and he was, accordingly, faced with the choice of restoring the status quo ante or moving on to accept the risk of system-transformative change, it was the latter course he adopted."³ He may not have been a democrat in the western sense but, unusually in Russian and Soviet history, he was a leader with a very strong conscience.

¹ Strayer, Why did the Soviet Union collapse?, p.199.

² Ibid.

³ Brown, The Gorbachev factor, p.309.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books.

- Akiner, Shirin, Islamic peoples of the Soviet Union, (London, Kegan Paul International, 1983).
- Boyes, Roger, The hard road to market, Gorbachev the underworld and the rebirth of capitalism, (London, Secker and Warburg, 1990).
- Brown, Archie, The Gorbachev Factor, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996).
- Coleman, Fred, The decline and fall of the Soviet empire, (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1996).
- Daniels, Robert V., The end of the Communist revolution, (London and New York, Routledge, 1993).
- Dawisha, Karen, Eastern Europe, Gorbachev and reform, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- Galeotti, Mark, Gorbachev and his revolution, (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1996).
- Goldman, Marshall I, What went wrong with perestroika, (New York, London, W.W. Norton and company, 1991).
- Gorbachev, Mikhail S., Perestroika, New thinking for our country and the world, (London, Collins, 1987).
- Hazan, Baruch A., Gorbachev and his enemies, (Boulder, Westview Press Inc., 1990).
- Hill, Ronald J. and Dellenbrant, Jan Ake, Gorbachev and perestroika, (Aldershot, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 1989).
- Keep, John L H., The last of the empires, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995).
- Kotkin, Stephen, Armageddon averted, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001).
- Laquer, Walter, Soviet Realities, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 1990).
- McCauley, Martin, Gorbachev, (London and New York, Longman, 1998).

- McCauley, Martin, The Soviet Union 1917-1991, (London, Longman, 1993).
- McNair, Brian, Glasnost, perestroika and the Soviet media, (London and New York, Routledge, 1991).
- Miller, John, Mikhail Gorbachev and the end of Soviet power, (London, MacMillan Press Ltd., 1993).
- Mlynar, Zdenek, Can Gorbachev change the Soviet Union? (Boulder, Westview Press, 1990).
- Naylor, Thomas H., The Gorbachev strategy, (Lexington, Massachusetts, D.C. Heath and company, 1988).
- Pearson, Raymond, The rise and fall of the Soviet empire, (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1998).
- Satter, David, Age of delirium, (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).
- Strayer, Robert, Why did the Soviet Union collapse? (New York and London, M.E. Sharpe, 1998).
- Steele, Jonathan, Eternal Russia, Yeltsin, Gorbachev and the mirage of democracy, (London, Faber and Faber, 1994).

Articles

- Pestov, S., "In Moscow everything is secret", Washington Post, 18 September 1988.
- Steele, Jonathan, "Why Gorbachev failed", New Left Review, no.26, 1996, pp.141-152.
- Tompson, W.J., "Kruschchev and Gorbachev as reformers", British Journal of Political Science, vol.23, no.1, 1993, pp.77-105.