

Unit 8. Disintegration of the USSR (1991)- Reasons and Impact



The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was a loose confederation of 15 republics with Russia as the leader. USSR was a strong bloc with great control over global politics from 1922 to 1991, when it was disintegrated into smaller units. In this post let's analyse the reasons and impact of the disintegration of the USSR.

History of USSR

The Russian Revolution of 1917 ended the Russian empire. This was followed by Russian Civil War which finally resulted in the formation of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922.



1. Armenia 2. Azerbaijan 3. Belarus 4. Estonia 5. Georgia 6. Kazakhstan 7. Kyrgyzstan 8. Latvia 9. Lithuania
10. Moldova 11. Russia 12. Tajikistan 13. Turkmenistan 14. Ukraine 15. Uzbekistan

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had a total of 15 republics before its disintegration in 1991. Russia was one of the republics. Listing below the member republics in the country.

1. Armenia
2. Azerbaijan
3. Belarus
4. Estonia
5. Georgia
6. Kazakhstan
7. Kyrgyzstan
8. Latvia
9. Lithuania
10. Moldova
11. Russia
12. Tajikistan
13. Turkmenistan
14. Ukraine
15. Uzbekistan

The Socialist Bloc or Second World

- USSR ≠ Socialist Bloc.
- Not to be confused with USSR; these are east Europeans countries, which showed allegiance to USSR and socialist/communist principles.
- USSR was the leader of the socialist bloc. *(So Socialist bloc is the super set and USSR is the subset, to make it simple)*
- Most of these countries were under Fascist rule during second world war, when USSR liberated them, they came under USSR control.
- **Warsaw pact** was the military alliance which kept the socialist group together. (Remember – NATO, the military alliance for capitalist countries)

Problems with USSR

1. Bureaucratic and authoritarian system.
2. Lack of democracy.
3. Lack of freedom of speech.
4. One party system (communist) – unaccountable to the people.
5. Dominance of Russia; neglect of the interests of other republics.
6. High expenditure on defense, low on infrastructure and technology.

Disintegration of the USSR : Major Events

1. **Crisis in the Socialist bloc** : People in many east European countries started protest against their own governments and USSR. Without the right intervention from USSR at the right time, communist governments in the second world collapsed one after the other.
2. **The fall of Berlin Wall**: Germany was divided after the second world war – among the socialist USSR and the capitalist western regimes. The fall of Berlin led to a series of events including the disintegration of the USSR.

3. **Economic and political reforms in USSR** : Gorbachev identified the economic and political problems of USSR, and started a series of reforms, with the intention to revive economy. This was a deviation from the communist policies, and was more closely associated with the market economy. Many communist leaders in USSR opposed reforms initiated by Gorbachev. They encouraged a coup in 1991.
 4. **Coup**: The coup of 1991.
 5. **Opposition against the coup** : Boris Yelsin who won popular election in Russian Republic, protested against the coup and central control of USSR. Freedom for republics became the slogan. Boris Yeltsin and the pluralist movement advocated democratization and rapid economic reforms while the hard-line Communist elite wanted to thwart Gorbachev's reform agenda.
 6. **Power shift from Soviet center to republics**: Republics like Russia, Ukraine, Belarus emerged powerful. They declared that the soviet union was disbanded.
- PS: The decision to split USSR into independent republics was not a joint one. Central Asian countries wanted to remain inside USSR. But decision was taken against their choice.

Factors which led to the disintegration of the USSR



We have seen the highlights of the dramatic events: the disintegration of the USSR, the collapse of the second world and thus the end of cold war. But why did Soviet Union disintegrate? Once the second most powerful country in the world -The Soviet Union – failed to keep it together the units. Was it the ambition of republics inside which led to the disintegration of Soviet Union?

1. Economic Weakness

The weakness of the economy was the major cause of dissatisfaction among the people in USSR. There was severe shortage of consumer items. The reasons for economic weakness were the following.

1. Huge military spending.
2. Maintenance of satellite states in Eastern Europe.
3. Maintenance of the Central Asian Republics within the USSR.

2. Political Un-accountability

The communist party regime (single party rule) for around 70 years turned authoritarian. There was widespread corruption, nepotism and lack of transparency. Gorbachev's decision to allow elections with a multi-party system and create a presidency for the Soviet Union began a slow process of democratization that eventually destabilized Communist control and contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

3. Gorbachev's reforms

Once people started to enjoy freedom under Michael Gorbachev's reforms, they demanded more. The demand grew into a big force which turned difficult to control. The people wanted to catch up with the west quickly.

4. Rise of nationalism

Rise of nationalism among countries like Russia, Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), Ukraine, Georgia etc is the most important and immediate cause of disintegration of the USSR. The national feeling was strong among the more prosperous areas in USSR and not in Central Asian republics. Ordinary people among prosperous republics didn't like to pay big price to uplift the backward Central Asian republics.

Consequences of the disintegration of the USSR

1. The fall of second world.
 2. The period marked the end of many communist regimes in response to mass protests.
 3. End of cold war: End of arms race, end of ideological confrontations.
 4. Change in power equations: Unipolar world, capitalist ideology, IMF, World Bank etc.
 5. Emergence of new countries and new alliances – Eg: Baltic countries aligned with NATO.
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