

# **The fall of the Soviet Union: The fall of a state or the fall of an ideology**

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## **Abstract**

During the last century or so, two dominant doctrines i.e. Capitalism and Socialism had been in a state of constant confrontation resulting in engaging the two Super powers, the United States and the Soviet Union in wars such as the Vietnam War and the Cold War. The Cold War that continued for several decades finally led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This article was an attempt to question the so called perception of conceiving socialism as a major cause of the disintegration of the USSR. It was found that the Russian Model of Socialism (Communism) was different from the Socialism of Marx and Engel in a number of aspects. It had also received immense criticism from some of the prominent Marxists. Based on the review of literature, the article concludes that the failure of communism in the Soviet Union should by no means be considered as the failure of socialism and as such socialism has nothing to do with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Instead, it is in fact the special model of socialism adopted and implemented in the Soviet Union that led to its disintegration. The basic line of argument here is that the Russian socialism was completely at odds with the socialism of Marx and Engels both in its spirit as well as in practice.

**Key words:** Socialism, Marx and Engels, Soviet Union, Disintegration, Causes

## **Introduction**

The fall of the Soviet Union is an important event in the history of humankind. It is often seen as the fall of one of the most dominant doctrines of its time that is Socialism. There is no doubt that the disintegration of the Soviet Union had had serious

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repercussions for the ongoing socialist movements in the rest of the world and ultimately put the socialism doctrine on its last leg. All this has resulted in a common perception that there is something terribly wrong with socialism. Further to this, it is also generally believed that socialism itself has served as the major cause of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This article is an attempt to question the so-called widely held notion of perceiving socialism as the most dominant factor in the fall of the Soviet Union. The author intends to respond to the so-called perception by trying to tackle a single question that will constitute the core of this article and may significantly contribute to on the ongoing debate. In simple words, the question may be put as; what is it that caused the Soviet Union to disintegrate: socialism or the Soviet communism?

The author believes and there is a great deal of evidence to support the notion that the disintegration of Soviet Union should not necessarily be conceived as the failure of socialism. In a similar vein, it is also important to understand that it is not appropriate to blame socialism for the fall of the Soviet Union. This is because the type of socialism (communism) adopted and implemented in the Soviet Union had encountered several deviations from the socialism of Marx and Engels and was thus regarded by many prominent Marxists of that time a betrayal to Socialism. As such one area of particular interest that may require special examination on part of the author is the quest for the pitfalls in the Russian model of socialism in order to know how it differed from the socialism of Marx and Engels. In addition to this, the author also intends to highlight several other factors that might have had played a pivotal role in the disintegration of the USSR. This article may serve as one of the many responses to the widely held notion of perceiving socialism as the major cause of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It is hoped that

the findings of this article may help in shaping the future of socialism.

Prior to engaging in discussing the core issue, it is considered imperative to give an outline of the paper. The contents of this article are arranged in a manner that allows the readers to get to the core of the article through a step by step approach. That is the article starts by introducing the readers to the origin, meaning and the different forms of socialism. The next portion which constitutes the core of this article focuses on the cause of the failure of socialism. The last portion is dedicated to discussion and conclusion.

## **2. Socialism: origin, meaning and types**

### **2.1 Origin**

Socialism as a way of life is often perceived to have been existing long ago prior to its first appearance as a doctrine in the journal of the Owenite movement in Britain in 1827 (Browning, 1997: 266). Where as according to Britannica Online, the term socialism was first used in 1830. The term had actually been applied to the writings of Fourier and Saint Simonians in France and Robert Owen in Britain<sup>1</sup>. The title of a book *“The Socialist Tradition from Moses to Lenin”* by Gray (1968) also points towards the fact that its roots are extending deep into the past. The very existence of Socialism as a historical phenomenon is often believed to be because of its emphasis on cooperation, fairness and equality, all of which have a missionary appeal (Browning, 1997: 266).

However, the emergence of socialism in the nineteenth century has a unique context and it is thus believed that the origin of the

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<sup>1</sup> **Socialism.** " *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 5 May 2008 <<http://search.eb.com/eb/article-66962>>.

nineteenth century socialism has its roots in the struggle movement of the working class who had remained victims of capitalism. Hudelson (1993: 17) has rightly pointed out that during the middle of the nineteenth century, socialism was seen as an answer to the social question that is an answer to the problems of poverty, slums, hunger, disease, crime, drugs and prostitution. In the words of Browning (1997: 266), the nineteenth century socialism proposed egalitarian moral principles for solving the problems and injustices caused by the industrial world. It emphasized on industrial reforms and fair distribution of wealth and power, a spirit of socialism which is often referred to as collectivism. According to Hudelson (1993: 17), an important feature of this socialism was to address the problems of the working class from a broader and more theoretical perspective.

## **2.2 Meaning**

As stated earlier, the roots of socialism extend deep into the past. The concept might have had undergone slight changes over the course of time. As such the term socialism has been defined in different ways by different people at different times (Browning, 1997). It can mean different things to different thinkers. And even where there is an agreement among thinkers on its meaning, there is still a room for disagreement on some important issues such as why is it necessary and how to achieve it (Hudelson (1993: 17). Prior to discussing the evolution that has taken place in the concept of socialism over the course of time (more or less related to the types of socialism) it is considered imperative to define socialism in the simplest possible words.

Generally speaking, Socialism refers to a system of social organization that advocates the control of property as well as the distribution of income by society rather than by individuals or

market forces<sup>2</sup>. To put it into simpler words, it is an economic system which advocates the ownership of the means of production by the workers rather than by the rich minority of capitalists. Socialism may also be defined as *“the organization of society in such a manner that any individual, man or woman, finds at birth equal means for the development of their respective faculties and the utilization of their labour. The organization of society in such a manner that the exploitation by one person of the labour of his neighbour would be impossible, and where everyone will be allowed to enjoy the social wealth only to the extent of their contribution to the production of that wealth”*<sup>3</sup>.

### **2.3 Forms of socialism**

The concept of socialism has evolved continuously since its inception. Consequently, socialism has taken several different forms. Some of the most prominent types of socialism are discussed below.

#### **2.3.1 Communism**

It is the doctrine of the conditions of liberation of the proletariat (Engels, 1847). It may also refer to a classless, stateless social organization based on common ownership of the means of production<sup>4</sup>. Communism is further categorized into Marxism-Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism, Religious Communism, Trotskyism and Shachtmanism.

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<sup>2</sup> Socialism (2008). In Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved April 22, 2008, From

Encyclopedia Britannica Online: <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9109587>

<sup>3</sup> Socialism defined by August Bebel in MIA: Encyclopedia of Marxism: Glossary of Terms

<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/s/o.htm#socialism>

<sup>4</sup> Helium <http://www.helium.com/items/153052-socialism-refers-broad-array> Access on: 05/05/08

### **2.3.2 Democratic Socialism**

Democratic socialism refers to any attempts aimed at bringing about socialism through peaceful means rather than through the use of force. It advocates the ownership of the means of production by the entire population and accumulation of political power in the hands of the people<sup>5</sup>.

### **2.3.3 Libertarian Socialism**

Libertarian socialism encourages the emergence and growth of the trade unions. It also advocates abolition of property and the handing over of resources and production into the hands of the workers. Some of the tendencies of this type of socialism are Anarchist Communism and Anarcho Syndicalism<sup>6</sup>.

## **3. Causes of the collapse of the Soviet Union**

The number of factors responsible for the disintegration of the Soviet Union is legion and may range from economic and social factors to the special mode of socialism that had been in practice in the Soviet Union until its disintegration. Among these factors, the one that is of special interest to the author in the discussion to follow is the form of socialism (communism) introduced by Lenin and his Bolshevik party in Russia. The very reason for critically analyzing the Russian Communism as a cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union is to question the widely held belief of blaming socialism for the disintegration of the USSR. This is done by highlighting the contradictions of the Soviet model of socialism (communism) with the socialism (of Marx). The detailed account of the Soviet model of socialism is aimed at convincing the readers that the Soviet model has nothing to do with the socialism (of Marx and Engels). Consequently, communism (the Soviet model of socialism) rather than the

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<sup>5</sup> Helium <http://www.helium.com/items/153052-socialism-refers-broad-array> Accessed on:16/05/08

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

socialism (of Marx and Engels) should be blamed for the fall of the Soviet Union. The other factors such as economic and social factors will also be highlighted with due consideration. It is deemed necessary to highlight these factors because the author considers them as a byproduct of the Soviet model of socialism.

### ***3.1 The Russian model of socialism and its shortcomings***

Socialism as a system of social organization and as an economic system was introduced in Russia once Vladimir Lenin and his Bolshevik party seized power in 1917. The Russian Socialism may in fact be referred to as 'Marxism-Leninism' a term that refers to Marx theories that had been amended and put into practice by Lenin. The Marxism-Leninism was envisaged as a means for the implementation of socialist policies in the country. The Bolsheviks were also able to combine the former Russian Empires to form the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR or Soviet Union)<sup>7</sup>. The Russian model, however, had a number of shortcomings and as such posed serious repercussions for the contemporary socialist movements around the world. The first and most important of the upheavals that it caused was the split in the international socialist movement. An important reason for the split in the international socialist movement was the difference in the attitude of the social democratic parties towards the war.

#### ***3.1.1 Cause of the split in the international socialist movement***

According to Hudelson (1993: 72) social democratic parties divided into three major camps on the basis of their attitude towards the war that is those showing patriotic support for the

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<sup>7</sup> MSN Encarta  
[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761572241/Communism.html#s1](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761572241/Communism.html#s1)  
accessed on: 15/05/08

war effort, those demanding an end to the war and those calling for transforming the war into a revolutionary war. Vladimir Lenin is said to be among the leaders of the revolutionary camp. Hudelson (1993) further points out that the terms socialism and communism which used to be pretty much synonymous until the end of the nineteenth century took on distinct meanings with the Bolshevik revolution of the 1917. Accordingly, socialists who followed the ideas of the Bolshevik leader V. I. Lenin came to be known as “communists” and those who did not as “socialists”.

### ***3.1.2 Revolutionary rather than evolutionary in its approach***

Another important feature that distinguishes the Russian Communism from Socialism and that may be referred to as the cause of the split in the international socialist movement, is its belief in the use of force for achieving its goals. Browning (1997: 266) points out that the most serious division in socialism can be observed between Marxist revolutionary parties and social democratic parties. The revolutionary Marxists parties, for instance, the Bolshevik party in Russia has believed in the use of force and have always tended to seek a revolutionary approach toward shaping the goals where as social democratic parties on the other hand have avoided the use of force and have tended to seek an evolutionary approach. In fact, Lenin and his Bolshevik party had taken certain steps which were clear deviations from Marxism. Consequently, a number of prominent Marxists considered the Bolshevik revolution as a perversion of the Marxism.

### ***3.1.3 Undermining the process of natural evolution***

While implementing communism in Russia, Lenin and his Bolshevik party also undermined the process of natural evolution, a term applied by Marx to identify the emergence of five different epochs namely primitive communism, ancient slave societies, feudalism, capitalism and socialism which were



sequentially ordered. Each epoch, according to Marx, had to emerge from its predecessor and in turn give birth to its successor (Hudelson, 1993). Unlike the social democratic parties who seek an evolutionary development whereby capitalism gradually changes into socialism, the Bolshevik party was committed to breaking with capitalism (Browning, 1997: 267) and as such skipped one of the epochs in the process of natural evolution.

### **3.1.4 Tendency towards dictatorship**

In addition to this, Lenin and his Bolsheviks party were also opposed to any form of parliamentary democracy. In the elections for the parliamentary body, the Constituent Assembly, the Bolsheviks won about 25 percent of the vote, Mensheviks won only 4 percent, the bourgeois parties won about 13 percent of the total votes. Whereas the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs) won majority of the votes. The SRs and some independents like Kerensky believed in the process of natural evolution and as such were convinced that a period of capitalism must precede the emergence of socialism. Consequently, they believed that a period of capitalism must follow the overthrow of the feudal tsarist regime in Russia (Heller and Nekrich, 1986: 31).

Despite the fact that the SRs attracted majority of the voters for their advocacy of the land reform (according to which land had to be taken from landowners and redistributed among the peasants) they failed to implement the land reforms because of the fear to lose their allies among the bourgeoisie. The SRs constituted the dominant group in the elected constituent assembly. As such the Bolsheviks had to relinquish power to the SRs. They, however, refused to do so because Lenin believed it to be a great mistake to adhere to the forms of parliamentary democracy (Kolakowski, 1978). Instead, Lenin and the

Bolsheviks declared the dictatorship of the proletariat. This gives us an idea of the kind of Soviet regime under the Bolsheviks revolution which was by no means a democratic republic (Hudelson, 1993: 75).

Karl Kautsky who had long ago tried to convince the Bolsheviks to help establish a democratic parliamentary republic prior to implementing socialism, criticized the Bolsheviks for betraying both democracy as well as socialism because Kautsky believed that there could be no socialism without democracy. As such, Kautsky concluded that the Bolsheviks revolution did not result in socialism. Rather it resulted in a dictatorship in which the Bolsheviks, the so-called communists, exploited the workers who were being unable to resist exploitation incurred by Bolsheviks because of the absence of democracy, freedom of press and freedom of organization (Salvadori, 1979: 223-225).

### ***3.1.5 Perceptions of prominent Marxists about the Russian model of socialism***

Kautsky was not the only Marxists who criticized the Bolsheviks. Many prominent Russian Marxists also showed serious concerns about the Bolshevik revolution. For instance, Pledhanov, the father of the Russian Marxism, denounced the dictatorship of the Bolshevik as the dictatorship of a group supported by terrorist means. According to Pledhanov, it had nothing to do with Marxism or Socialism. Similarly, Vera Zasulich, one of the founders of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, denounced the Bolshevik revolution as a counterrevolutionary coup. Another leading theoretician of Russian Marxism, Iullii Martov, considered the Bolshevik revolution to be at odds with the Marxist theory of history and cultural values because of its belief in use of violent force (Burbank, 1986).

## **3.2 Economic causes of the collapse of the Soviet Union**

Another important reason that is generally perceived to have equally contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union is related to economic upheavals. It was in fact the failure of the economic system in Soviet Union that not only compelled the Soviet bureaucracy to rethink of the economic system but also acted as catalyst for the collapse of other socialist countries. The failure of the economic system caused a decrease in rate of development of production forces which in turn ultimately led to stagnation (Fotopoulos, 2005). There was considerable decrease in the growth rate of industrial output in the USSR from 1960s to 1980s. For instance, the growth rate fell from 7 percent in 1960s to 4 percent in 1970s and 2 percent in 1980s (Szymanski). Similarly, a continuous decline was observed in the average GDP growth rate which fell from 7 percent in 1960s to about 5 percent in 1970s and 2 percent in 1980s (Fotopoulos, 2005). Some of the reasons of the collapse of the Soviet economy are discussed below.

### **3.2.1 Centrally planned economy**

In the Soviet Union, under Stalin, the economy was centrally planned where as the political power was also mainly concentrated in the hands of the communist party ((Hudelson, 1993: 86).

### **3.2.2 Problems with the centrally planned economy**

One of the major problems with the social statism is to combine 'growth' with 'social justice', two elements that are apparently incompatible. Because the 'growth' element often leads to the concentration of economic power whereas the 'social justice' element leads to the dispersion of economic power and to equality. Thus, in an attempt to make the benefits of the growth accessible to everyone, the socialist statism, often ignores the

fundamental interdependence of the growth and the concentration of the economic power. Similarly, the merging of the growth element with the social justice element results in an incompatibility between the ends and the means. Consequently, in a socialist statism, the ends (growth economy) may not be compatible with the means (central planning). The greater the degree of statism, the more incompatible will be the ends and means, thus further contributing to the failure of the system (Fotopoulos, 2005).

### **3.2.3 Engagement in wars**

One of the major reasons for the decline in the Soviet economy may also be attributed to its continuous engagement in several wars such as the World War I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnamese War and the Cold War. Whereas, on the one hand, the wars brought huge sufferings to the Soviet Union in terms heavy loses of human life, it also deteriorated the Soviet economy on the other hand. Despite the fact that the Soviet Union stood victorious in some of these wars (for instance, the Korean and the Vietnamese wars), however, it gained very little compared to the costs incurred on these wars<sup>8</sup>. The Cold War served a means of engaging the two superpowers in heavy Arm's Race. As such, the financial costs of the cold War posed serious repercussions for the Soviet economy. The United States exploited this opportunity to keep the Soviet Union engaged in long lasting conflict which deteriorated the Soviet economy on the one hand and demoralize the Soviet regime on the other hand. Consequently, the war that had been inflicted on the Afghans as a short term military intervention soon became an expensive stay for a decade. The financial costs of the Cold War is, thus, believed to have brought the Soviet Union on its last leg by the mid of 1980s (Hobsbawm, 1994: 479).

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<sup>8</sup> Helium <http://www.helium.com/items/216956-soviet-union-established-years> accessed on 05/05/08

### **3.3 Social causes**

One of the factors for the long survival of the communist party in Russia may also be attributed to the level education of the Russian people and their level of exposure to the outside world. Hudelson (1993) points out that by the 1970s, a lot had been changed in terms of education and exposure of the Russian people to outside world especially the West. Hedelson states that by the 1970s, an overwhelming Russian population was well educated and living in urban areas. Similarly, because of the improvement in Soviets' relationship with the Western countries during the late 1960s and 1970s, a huge number of the Soviet citizens had the opportunity to travel the West. This exposure played a significant role in undermining the official anti-capitalism ideology according to which the capitalist system was suppose to being poverty and sufferings to the workers.

Corruption is another factor that had devastating impacts on the Russian society. Hudelson (1993) points out that with in the Soviet system, party officials enjoyed extraordinary power over the distribution of scarce consumer goods. Having connections with the party official, a person could thus easily get the consumers goods such apartments, cars, televisions or refrigerators without waiting for his turn to come. The system thus resulted in creating ample opportunities for bribes, kickbacks and payoffs. It became a common perception to use the system to one's advantage. Within the communist party and the government circles were mafias who exploited their positions of power for personal gains. According to Hobsbawn (1994: 476), by the mid 1980s, corruption had become a prominent phenomenon throughout the Soviet Union and posed a major threat to the existence of the Soviet state.

## **4. Discussion and conclusion**

To begin with, I must point out that the above discussion on the causes of the disintegration of the Soviet Union is a brief account and hence, should by no means be regarded as a comprehensive document on the subject. The author admits to have had skipped many important factors that could have been arguably be stated as reasons for the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This is because the prescribed length of the article suggested to take into account only those factors which the author perceived to be relatively more relevant and most important.

It is worth repeating here that this article was interested to question the widely held perception of conceiving socialism as the cause of the disintegration of the USSR. Consequently, the whole discussion in the article revolved around the factors responsible for the fall of the Soviet Union. We saw that such factors ranged from economic and social factors to the special model of socialism being in practice in the Soviet Union. In order to conclude this discussion, it is important to take any stance that is either to agree with those who consider that the failure of the Soviet Union was mainly caused by the failure of socialism in the Soviet Union or to go the other way round that is to argue against it.

I do not feel hesitant to state that the failure of communism in the Soviet Union should by no means be considered as the failure of socialism and as such socialism has nothing to do with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Instead I believe that it was in fact the special model of socialism adopted and implemented in the Soviet Union that led to its disintegration. The basic line of argument here is that the Russian socialism was completely at odds with the socialism of Marx and Engels both in its spirit as well as in practice. Consequently, it seems a bit premature to herd the two (i.e. socialism and Russian communism) with the

same stick. That is to put them both into the same category without taking into account the fact that the two differed from each other both in their spirits as well as in practice. Owing to this, it would be unjust to make socialism responsible for the sufferings caused by *Russian communism* or in other words to make *socialism* responsible for the fall of the Soviet Union. Hence, the basic argument here is that the two should be tackled two different systems, it is deemed necessary to give a detailed account of how the two differs from each other.

The first and most important thing to point out is that the Russian model of socialism should by no means be considered as true socialism. The founder of the Russian Communism, Vladimir Lenin, had in fact made certain modification to the theories of the founder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century socialism (Marx). These modifications were later on called *Marxism-Leninism* and served as the core principles of the Russian model of socialism. Marxism-Leninism or the Russian Communism was in fact at odds with the socialism of Marx and Engels in a number of manners. For instance, contrary to the socialist democratic parties, Lenin and his Bolshevik party were revolutionary in their approach towards a change. They would also not feel hesitant in the use of violent force in achieving any desired goal (the change). Accordingly, they insisted Marxists in other countries to follow the lessons of the Bolshevik revolution in their countries of residence. Hence, these principles were at large at odds with the Marxist theory of socialism, they got severe criticism from a number of prominent Marxists. This resulted in a clear division in international social movement. Those influenced by Lenin's philosophy called themselves as *communists* and those who did not were called as *socialists*.

Another contradiction of the Russian communism with socialism is to ignore the process of natural evolution. According to Marx,

the natural evolution referred to five different epochs through which a society normally passes and finally reaches the state of socialism. These epochs included primitive communism, ancient slave societies, feudalism, capitalism and socialism which were sequentially ordered. Similarly, each epoch had to emerge from its predecessor and in turn give birth to its successor. By the time when Lenin his Bolshevik party seized power, Russia had hardly passed through the feudalism state and as such was not ready to enter the final stage of the natural evolution that is socialism. Consequently, many Marxists had warned the Bolshevik party to avoid the implementation of communism in Russia because it was not the right time for it.

The final and most important contradiction in this case is the tendency of the Bolshevik party towards dictatorship. Of the twenty one conditions required of all parties affiliated with the new international, one was regarding support for the dictatorship of the proletariat (Hudelson, 1993). And Lenin and the Bolshevik party showed its support for the dictatorship of the proletariat when at a certain point in time they refused to relinquish power to the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs) who had got majority in the elections for the parliamentary body, the Constituent Assembly and declared dictatorship of the proletariat.

I must state that I also believe that reasons other than this (Russian communism), responsible for the fall the Soviet Union, are in fact the byproducts of this special mode of socialism. That is to say that the economic and social reasons discussed earlier that do have a pivotal role in fall of the Soviet Union are also closely linked to failure of the communist system. Their role in the fall of the Soviet Union is secondary because (as I stated earlier) they are the byproducts of the communism. For instance, corruption which is one of the social causes and that had become a way of life in most of the Soviet Union by the end of



the 1970s may be attributed to the existing inefficiencies with in the Soviet system. In a similar vein, the centrally planned economy (an important feature of Soviet model of socialism) resulted in increasing the complexity of the economy that is there had been a considerable increase in the chain of command connecting enterprises with Moscow and also with one another<sup>9</sup>.

The above discussion is more or less a comprehensive account on the reasons of the fall of the Soviet Union. It gives us an idea of what is it that should be considered as the cause of the disintegration of the USSR. It was found that the major cause of fall of the Soviet Union is the Soviet model of socialism itself. The other causes that seem to exacerbate the disintegration process are more or less the outcome of the Soviet model. Hence, the Soviet model of socialism is at odds with the socialism (of Marx and Engels) in many respects, it is, therefore, argued that the Soviet communism rather than socialism should be considered as the major cause of the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

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<sup>9</sup> Hudelson (1993)

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