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## The Former Soviet Union

In just a few short years, life in the largest country on Earth-the Russian Federation-has changed radically. On December 26, 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) ceased to exist. In its place are the Russian Federation (Russia) and 14 independent countries. The impact of this change was felt across the globe reaching to European countries as far away as Cuba and Algeria. The demise of the Soviet Union was and continues to be an international event of the greatest importance.

1. What problems would the USA have if it broke up into different countries? What would the impact be on the world?

At its height, the USSR covered 8.6 million square miles, making it one of the largest territorially contiguous empires in history. Covering 11 time zones, it stretched from the Gulf of Finland to the Bering Strait and was home to more than 100 ethnic groups. Understanding this geographic and ethnic diversity is essential to understanding Russia today. For the countries of the former USSR, the past decade has been that and more. Still in transition, this vast region promises many more surprises.

2. What problems do an area this large and a population this diverse poses to forming one state?

## **Karl Marx: The Father of Communism**

In 1848, German philosopher, Karl Marx with Friedrich Engels, published an influential pamphlet called the *Communist Manifesto*. Marx's criticism focused on the dominant political and economic system of his time, known as "capitalism". Germany, the United States, and England were powerful nations that lived under this system, and they were exporting it-sometimes by force-over the face of the globe. Capitalism encourages competition between its citizens and provided rewards in an unequal way. Capitalist nations defended this distribution of goods on the grounds that the factory owners had often taken risks, or mastered skills, that the neat-packer had not. Therefore, the factory owner deserved the extra benefits.

3. How did capitalist nations defend capitalism?

Marx directed scathing attacks against this philosophy. The capitalist nations, he argued, allowed the wealthy few to amass huge fortunes, while the numerous poor toiled in unsafe factories for low wages, lived in wretched filth, and died before their time. Worse still, the rich denied equal opportunity to the poor, hoarding goods and reserving advantages like education and health care for themselves. Vast mansions existed alongside tenement-houses. In the one, every possible luxury could be found and every need was met, while next-door whole families stuffed themselves into single rooms and ate meager rations. How could it be fair that the wealthy few had extra millions in the bank while the masses struggled to survive or starved to death?

4. Summarize Marx's argument against Capitalism?

Writing from Paris, where he lived in exile, Marx spoke of the dawning of a new social order based on the equal distribution of wealth and possessions among a nation's citizenry. In such a society, Marx theorized, tranquil relations would prevail between all men and women and age-old problems like poverty, ignorance, and starvation would vanish. The rich would be compelled to yield their surplus to the poor and individuals would produce according to their abilities and consume according to their needs. Everyone would have what he or she needed and no one citizen would possess more than another.

5. Describe Marx's Utopian Society.

Marx realized that his idealistic vision of the future would never arrive until certain events came to pass. A brilliant economist and social critic, Marx understood that massive obstacles stood in the way of his Utopian World. Casting his eye back across the arc of history, he asserted that in every era the same fundamental conflict emerged. The few well placed and powerful sought to maintain their wealth by actively suppressing the natural desires of the many poor. These cruel circumstances were hard to change because the rich had no reason to share and they possessed the means by which to control the impoverished masses. The sheer numbers of the downtrodden represented a definitive advantage and a declaration of war on their part would resolve the dispute. Marx took the view that it was the destiny of history itself that this battle should take place and that the victorious poor would usher in an age of justice and equality.

6. What did Marx argue was the fundamental conflict in every historical era? What did Marx argue makes it so hard to change the system?

## **A Country in Turmoil: Russia 1900-1918**

In 1883, Karl Marx died in London, England. At the time of his death, the full-scale revolutions he had predicted has not occurred and no nation had declared themselves communist. However, between 1848 and 1883, Marx had been busy spreading his creed. In the 1850s and 1860s, he succeeded in forming various councils that directed broad revolutionary strategies. Throughout Europe, discontented workers met to plot the overthrow of political systems that were not communist in nature. Among the leaders of these widespread movements were two Russians, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. Having been banished from Russia on the charge of treason both promoted revolutions from abroad. Within Russia, a young man recently converted to the cause of democratic socialism hoped to unseat the leader. His given name was Joseph Dzhugashvili, but he adopted the surname of Stalin, which means “man of steel”.

7. What “treasonous” acts do you think caused the exile of Lenin and Trotsky? What were they doing in Europe?

As the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century approached, Russia lingered in the past. Where other European nations had begun the process of “industrialization” which sent citizens pouring into the cities and brought the unmatched power of machines to their daily lives. Russia remained a country of farmers tethered to the old-fashioned plow. Illiteracy was higher in Russia than elsewhere, poverty was more widespread, and food was scarce.

8. Describe the social and economic conditions of Russia at the turn of the century.

More significantly, Russia's political system was a remnant of the past. In Great Britain, France, and Germany, democratic political systems had replaced the ancient rights of kings and queens and yielded partial power to the common man. Voters elected representatives to governing bodies and thus secured a voice in the national decision-making process. However, in Russia, there was little change. The Czar still occupied the royal throne and dictated state policy without regard for the concerns of the people. He claimed to draw his power directly from God and passed the throne to a chosen successor without the interference of elections. His rule was absolute. Those protesting his decisions were subject to severe and immediate punishment, including executions.

9. Describe the Russian Political System.

Russian citizens faced enormous hardships, including poverty, hunger, and joblessness. In 1914, tensions between the expanding and increasingly wealthy nations of Europe exploded in World War I. Russia joined the battle on the side of the British, French, and Italians. They fought the united Germans and Austrians. From the beginning of the conflict, Russia was outmatched. Money, food, and raw materials flowed out of the country to support the war effort. A dangerously unstable populace sunk deeper into despair. Food was even scarcer. The soldiers used the cotton needed to make clothing. Precious metals were fashioned into guns and bullets. Starvation and disease ran rampant throughout the country and still the Czar persisted in the war effort. The royal family was not as deeply affected by the war as the common people were. They possessed luxuries while peasants desperately sought the barest of necessities.

10. Describe the effects of World War I on Russia.

Between 1914 and 1917, the cities of Russia witnessed many minor revolts among the citizenry. Tens of thousands of hungry workers joined the communist “soviets” (the Russian word for councils). They organized massive protests and labor strikes to show their displeasure at food shortages and the endless prosecution of the war. The well-organized communists dominated the Soviet leadership and made impassioned speeches demanding “land, bread, and peace”. The workers, ignored by the government, rallied to the Soviets and thus added themselves to the communist cause.

11. Who joined the Soviets? What impact did the Soviets have on Russia between 1914 and 1917?

Meanwhile, the Russian army suffered defeats in the field and Russian territory began to be lost to the enemy. Finally, in February of 1917, weeks of violent street skirmishes backed by Soviets ended with a mob assault on the seat of government. In a remarkable and long-awaited moment, the Czar’s soldiers stood aside and let people take control of the streets. On February 28, 1917, Czar Nicholas II admitted defeat and left the royal throne.

12. Why do you think Czar Nicholas II’s soldiers did not defend his government?

## **“All Power to the Soviets”: The Communist Takeover**

For eight months following the Czar’s abdication in late February of 1917, there was no unified or widely accepted government within Russia. A council of acknowledged leaders formed a Provisional Government, but it proved weak and ineffectively. Worse, what little power the Provisional Government possessed, it used foolishly. It repeatedly decided to keep Russia in World War I despite continuing street protests and disastrous shortages of food and raw materials.

13. What was the Provisional Government?

Meanwhile the Soviets, now fully controlled by the brilliant organizer and motivator, Vladimir Lenin, focused on winning the support of army troops and to take control of Russia’s railroads and telegraph lines. In this way the Soviets could manipulate all movement and communication within the country. With the full backing of the troops, they would possess the means with which to secure state authority for them selves.

14. Why was Lenin focusing on the army and the railroads?

Two Prominent communist allies, his old friend Leon Trotsky and a new acquaintance, Joseph Stalin; aided Lenin. The three guided Soviet policy promising workers and soldiers food, abundant land, and an end to Russia's involvement in the war. In the future, Lenin declared, goods would not be stolen from the poor and given to the rich. Vast tracts of land would not be set aside for the church, the royal family, or the wealthy. Everyone would benefit equally from a new social order, an experiment that had never been tried before. "Land, bread, and peace" for everyone, Lenin promised. "All power to the Soviets."

15. How did the Bolsheviks/Communists gain the support of the people?

In October of 1917; Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin decided to make their move. Thousands of Soviet workers and soldiers were armed and informed of a plan to seize the government. On October 24, 1917, the assault on the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, where the Provisional Government was headquartered, began. By the following night, the Provisional Government had fallen and Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin were poised to usher in the first-ever Communist government.

16. When did the Communist take control? Who did Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin lead into the assault against the Provisional Government?

## **The Aftermath: Communism's First Years: 1917-1922**

Days after the successful revolution, Lenin called a meeting of all Russian Soviets. He opened this Congress with words of characteristic bravado, "We shall now proceed to the construction of the communist order." The new soviet government quickly stripped all land from owners and forbade the holding of private property. Fields were to be redistributed according to need. Hired labor was outlawed. Banks and businesses would be "nationalized" gradually. They would come under the control of the state. The owners would not divide profits unfairly. The communist era had begun. Its goal was equality and peace for all and forever.

17. Why do you think that the communists stripped all land from the owners? What were they hoping to accomplish?

A peace agreement proved difficult to accomplish. Eventually, the Russians were forced to accept an unfavorable treaty at Brest-Litovak, Poland in March of 1918. They agreed to give up a great deal of their own territory and pay a huge monetary penalty to the enemy. Within Russia, the formerly well placed and wealthy, now displaced from their land and divested of their possessions, begged to organize a campaign against the Soviets. General dissatisfaction with the peace treaty brought more members to their cause. Concerned foreign nations, including the United States and Great Britain, contributed money and resources to these opponents of the revolution.

18. Why did some people oppose the Communist Revolution?

The Soviet leadership of Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin, faced a dilemma. How could they bring about an age of peace and equality when they were confronted with opposition? Their answer was quick and brutal. The dissenting elements must be rooted out and destroyed. To do this Soviets formed the "Red Army" and began a terror campaign which identified and executed suspected anti-Communists. Between 1918 and 1921, a civil war raged between the communists and their enemies. Led by Leon Trotsky, the "Red Army" prevailed and the communists maintained their hold on power. Some wondered whether the communist revolution had already been betrayed as they asked, "How could tranquility come to Russia now that so many citizens had been killed?"

19. Why did the ideas of the Revolution conflict with the Civil War?

Before Lenin could formulate an answer and bring about the golden days of the new government, he suffered three paralyzing strokes. In 1922, the last stroke took his life. A new leader needed to step in and both Trotsky and Stalin coveted the seat of power.

20. When did Lenin die?

## **Trotsky and Stalin: 1922-1940**

Trotsky was a brilliant speaker and writer. His passionate support of communism had provided much of the fire in the early years of the Soviets. Trotsky was a man with an appetite for books and ideas. He was a visionary thinker and hoped to transform Russia into an industrial powerhouse, the envy of the whole world. When he spoke in defense of these dreams, he did so with eloquence and with such command of his subject matter that he gained many loyal followers. He was an intellectual giant and a formidable opponent for Joseph Stalin.

21. Describe Trotsky's strengths.

Stalin had his strengths as well. His mind was quick and he spoke well, but he was not of Trotsky's caliber in these realms. Where Trotsky dreamed, Stalin focused instead on administrative duties and on creating bonds of loyalty between himself and powerful men within the Soviets. By the time Lenin died in 1922, Stalin's strategy had paid off. In the ensuing discussion of new leadership, he had the hard-won support of important allies. Even the brilliant words of Trotsky could not turn them from backing Stalin.

22. Describe Stalin's strengths.

The Stalin era lasted for 25 years. Among his most important contributions to the Soviet Union were his “ Five Year Plans”. These plans were ambitious program to propel Russia into the industrial age. The first plan began in 1928 and ended in 1933. The second plan and third plan were undertaken in the following ten years. By the early 1940s, Russia had achieved an industrial strength that was equal to the former world leaders in the capitalist countries.

23. What did Stalin hope to accomplish with the “Five- Year Plans”?

The changes came with a price. Unable to tolerate any competing voices or ideas, Stalin maintained his grip on power through the use of political and social terror. He increased the size of Russia’s internal police force (KGB) drastically and he used them to spy on suspected enemies within the country. In effect, Stalin silenced all opposition and any words uttered against him became a rationale for incarceration or death. Vast prison systems sprung up in the hinterlands of the Russian state. The prisons or “Gulags” used inmates as cheap labor and deprived them of the barest of necessities. It was a brutal institution designed to inspire fear in prisoners and in free citizens who contemplated criticizing the Stalin regime.

24. Describe the strategies that Stalin used to hold power.

In 1934, Stalin set a series of political “purges” in motion. High-ranking officials in the Soviet government were systematically arrested, forced to admit to crimes they did not commit, and executed. Newspapers and television stations tirelessly promoted communist doctrines or were shut down. Individual ownership of business was still strictly forbidden. In all aspects the Soviet government retained an iron grip on the nation and attempted to control the lives, ambitions, and even the thought of its citizens.

25. What role did the newspapers and television stations play in maintaining Communist control and power?

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev took the reigns of Soviet power. Many considered him a courageous and farsighted leader. He saw that the Soviet Union had both economic and social shortcomings that inhibited growth. The western nations, by contrast, were increasingly prosperous and their worldwide influence grew correspondingly. Gorbachev knew that Russia must change to compete with the western world.

26. Why did Gorbachev want change?

Thus, in 1985, Gorbachev announced the twin pillars of a radical new policy called **Perestroika** (economic restructuring) and **Glasnost** (social and political openness). Soon he introduced legislation that loosened the restrictions on individual ownership of property and business and allowed for greater freedom of expression. Ideas long unspoken coursed through the Russian nation. People began to think that perhaps socialism was not the best thing for Russia and that maybe the Communist leaders were ineffective and corrupt. Once unleashed, these ideas proved difficult to stop or influence. Within several years, the once unassailable Soviet government teetered on the verge of collapse.

27. What effect did **Glasnost** and **Perestroika** have on Communist power?

By 1991, a rising tide of voices was opposed to the Communist government. Large-scale street protests throughout Russia and in its closely allied satellite states shook the foundations of the Soviet system. The people were free to speak and in vast numbers they rejected the long experiment with Communism. In December of 1991, the Communist government of the Soviet Union acknowledged its own end and an anxious period of instability and doubt began.

28. What are some dangers that you think would arise after the end of the communist system in the former Soviet Union and her satellite states in Eastern Europe?

In June of 1991, Boris Yeltsin was elected president of the Russian Federation. Later that year, an attempted coup by communist hard-liners had the effect of strengthening Yeltsin's position. Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as head of the communist party and on December 25, 1991, resigned the presidency of the USSR. The following day, the national parliament voted the USSR out of existence. After 74 years, the USSR quietly faded into history, not in a bloody revolution, but in a relatively peaceful, democratic way. Fifteen independent countries replaced the USSR.

29. Do you think these changes could have happened during Stalin's rule? Why or why not?

### **A Nation in Transition**

In May of 1989 before the dissolution of the USSR, the three Baltic republics of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia declared their sovereignty. At the same time, it was unclear exactly what this meant and what the ramifications would be. The three republics continued to push for separation from the USSR for nineteen months. On January 13, 1991, the Soviet Union sent troops and tanks into Lithuania. This occupation rallied outside support for Lithuania. Nine months later, after the collapse of the USSR, the Soviet parliament acknowledged the independence of the three Baltic republics.

After these events, many other republics declared their independence. Some became independent states when the USSR was finally dissolved a few months later. Other republics remained a part of the Russian Federation. For example, the republic of Checheno-Ingushetia split apart in 1991 and the leaders of Chechenya declared independence.

30. Why do you think Russia allowed some nations to become independent and no others? What factors would be important in making that decision?