End of Cold War Handout or Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse

**Afghanistan War:**

Across the border in the USSR, Soviet leaders decided to intervene in Afghanistan. In December, 1979 the Soviets deposed the new leader and installed one that would be more sympathetic to the Soviets. The United States angrily denounced the Soviet Union’s invasion, but secretly hoped that involvement in this conflict would deplete the Soviets’ resources. Toward that end, the Americans began to supply Afghani rebels with weapons and training.

As time went by the war in Afghanistan took its toll on the Soviet Union. The continued loss of men and material and the enormous cost made the war extremely unpopular in the Soviet Union and an actual anti-war movement began, which eventually led to the withdrawal of soviet troops.

**Soviet Economy Fails:**

President Reagan argued that through a massive defense build-up, the United States would pressure the Soviet Union to continue to keep pace, which would ultimately deplete the Soviets of their resources. During the 1980s defense spending increased from $134 billion in 1980 before Reagan took office to $253 billion in 1989 when he left office. This meant that American defense spending was seven percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1989, and had dramatically increased the federal deficit. Yet the Soviets responded to this increase in spending and in the first half of the 1980s, the Soviets increased their defense spending from 22 to 27 percent of GDP, while they did not increase the production of civilian goods.

In the early 1980s, the Soviet Union appeared to be thriving to outside observers. Its nuclear stockpile was larger than the United States, it was building new military bases throughout Africa and the Middle East, and its political clout in parts of the world, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, was at an all-time high. But appearances were deceiving. The Soviet economy was outperforming the United States in several key industrial areas, but it was doing so at enormous cost – Soviet industries were far less efficient than their American counterparts, a fact that could be attributed to the growing technological gap between the United States and the USSR.

In the 1980s, the Soviet Union was less productive than the United States, which was starting to drag down the Soviet economy and security. It took the Soviets longer than the Americans to process their raw materials and build new structures. For example, whereas it generally took American companies less than two years to build an industrial plant, the Soviets spent ten years constructing the same kind of plant. At the same time the Soviets began to use more resources than the United States (1.8 times more steel, 2.3 times more cement, and 7.6 times more fertilizer). As the decade progressed, the Soviets’ inability to keep pace with production made the country increasingly dependent on imported goods, which started to alter the economy in serious and irreversible ways.

**Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc Split:**

Soviet Union maintained an oppressive hold on political and cultural life within the Eastern Bloc, sparking a great deal of social discontent. To top things off, all of these problems were exacerbated by the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan, which was dragging on with no end in sight. Inside the Soviet Union’s Iron Curtain, residents in Eastern Europe began to grow restless and vocalize their discontent in ways that had not been allowed in earlier years.

In 1983 Lech Walesa founded an independent trade union called Solidarity in Poland, part of the Soviet Bloc. The mere fact that a trade union formed inside the Soviet Bloc was troubling for the government. A primary goal of the Soviet Union was to serve the needs of workers, which should have made labor union unnecessary. But when this union formed (and when its founder received the Nobel Peace Prize), it signaled to the rest of the world that workers were dissatisfied in the Soviet Union.
Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union in 1985. To the surprise of most Soviets, Americans, and international observers, Gorbachev soon became one of the leaders that hastened the end of the Soviet Union. In part Gorbachev’s personal background contributed to his decisions to reform his country. He belonged to a younger generation of communist leaders that realized as early as the late 1960s that the Stalinist model of government was not working effectively. He was aware of the country’s cracks and vulnerabilities (many of which you read about earlier in this lesson) and he decided to act in unprecedented ways. When Gorbachev took office he instituted a number of new initiatives including glasnost (or openness), which dismantled many of the repressive components of Soviet life, and perestroika (or reform), which was an attempt to restructure the Soviet economy by introducing certain parts of capitalism like private ownership of property. He also transformed foreign policy by lessening Soviet control of Eastern Europe and by setting up number of meetings with President Reagan.

In the late 1980s the Soviet Union and its satellite states began to crumble. Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms were unable to save the Soviet Union – and in fact, some historians argue that the reforms actually made the USSR fall apart more quickly. Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost, or social and cultural openness, allowed Soviet citizens to begin vocalizing their complaints with the Communist system. This, combined with perestroika, Gorbachev’s program of economic, political, and social restructuring, became the unintended catalyst for dismantling the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union’s satellite states in Eastern Europe began to agitate for independence, Gorbachev broke from the past when the Soviets would have crushed any rebellion with their military such as they did in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Gorbachev made it clear that the USSR would not use its military might to prevent their withdrawal from the Soviet sphere.

The opening of satellite states:
The world watched in disbelief but with growing admiration as Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan, democratic governments overturned Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, Germany was reunited, the Warsaw Pact withered away, and the Cold War came to an abrupt end. In 1989 every communist state in Europe – Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, East Germany, Yugoslavia, and Albania – abandoned their communist governments. By November, the East German government announced that its citizens could travel freely between East and West Berlin, which inspired East Berlin residents to begin scaling, then chipping, and finally tearing down the Berlin Wall that had separated the two regions of the city and world for decades. The Berlin Wall was entirely destroyed by 1990. With varying degrees of violence and democracy, these Eastern European nations decided – and were allowed by the Soviets – that Communism no longer best served the needs of their citizens.

Crumbling Soviet Infrastructure: Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster:

In April 1986, the worst environmental accident in world history happened at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine, releasing a great deal of radioactive material into the Soviet Union and parts of Europe. The explosion, fire, and release of radiation affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of people (though less than 100 were killed in the immediate explosion), and the area around the nuclear power plant will be contaminated for 24,000 years. The accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant was graphic evidence, not only of how obsolete the Soviet technology was, but also of the failure of the old Communist system.

The accident became a symbol of the crumbling Soviet infrastructure and its inability to keep up with America’s economy and technology.

End of the Soviet Union:

But in 1991, the Soviet Union itself began to disintegrate. The Communist Party and Soviet government had become seriously weakened and lost credibility among its member states. Some of the republics – or regions – of the Soviet Union declared their independence and the Soviet government could not stop this fragmentation. Gorbachev resigned as leader of the Communist Party and Soviet Government, and the Soviet Union was no longer a country; the former Soviet Union dissolved into 15 separate nations.