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Stalin Caused the Soviet Collapse

By Peter Rutland

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Twenty years after the August 1991 coup that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is worth revisiting the puzzle of the Soviet Union's abrupt demise. Which individual more than any other should be held responsible for the Soviet collapse? The usual answers would be Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (for liberals) or U.S. President Ronald Reagan (for conservatives). But in reality, only one figure deserves the credit: Josef Stalin.

Stalin is often portrayed as an evil strategic genius who took advantage of the weakness of the West and the presence of the Red Army in Berlin in 1945 to expand the Soviet empire deep into Europe.

In reality, Stalin's projection of Soviet power into Central Europe was a strategic blunder that ultimately doomed the Soviet state. Stalin fully accepted Vladimir Lenin's argument that imperialism was "the highest stage of capitalism." This meant that as long as capitalism existed, it would try to expand through imperialist wars and territorial conquest. To protect the Soviet Union from such an attack, Stalin decided to maintain his giant armies in peacetime and to invest in securing a huge swathe of real estate in Eastern Europe as a buffer zone against future assaults.

But Stalin's strategic thinking was terribly out of date. There would be no imperialist attack in the decades after 1945. The deployment of intercontinental ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads made war between the superpowers unthinkable. Moreover, the imperialist mind-set had destroyed itself in the successive bloodbaths of World War I and World War II. In the decade after 1945, European colonial empires were in the process of disintegration, and the United States itself was not interested in building an empire or starting any new massive land wars.

Thus, Stalin was protecting himself against a military threat that no longer existed and was turning the Soviet Union into a multinational empire at the very moment when the practice of empire-building became an anachronism and nationalism was growing in strength.

Stalin's defenders — and there are still many of them in contemporary Russia — portray him as a visionary leader who saved the Soviet Union from the Nazi onslaught. They justify the suffering of Soviet citizens under Stalin as the price that had to be paid to industrialize the country quickly and guarantee its national security against foreign enemies — two prerequisites to provide its citizens with a brighter future. But in reality, Stalin was trapped in outdated 19th-century assumptions about the character of warfare and the nature of power in the late 20th-century world.

In trying to protect himself from Western imperialism, Stalin set the Soviet Union on a path to self-destruction. The Soviet Union was saddled with a bloated military that absorbed at least 1/4 of its gross domestic product, and it had to deploy millions of soldiers to maintain control over its Eastern European possessions. ⊠

By the end of World War II, Stalin had incorporated the Baltic states, Moldova and western Ukraine into the Soviet Union. The overwhelming majority of the people of these occupied territories did not want to be a part of the Soviet Union, and even the communist leaders of those nations later shared that sentiment. If Stalin had not insisted on absorbing the Baltic states but had let them go the way of Finland — independent of Russia since 1918 — perhaps Gorbachev's reform efforts during the perestroika period could have succeeded. As it turned out, his reforms were quickly derailed by the nationalist unrest in the Baltic states and the Caucasus. What's more, Gorbachev's willingness to tolerate limited force to suppress nationalists within the Soviet Union, from Azerbaijan to Lithuania, led to the defection of Boris Yeltsin's democratic forces from the perestroika coalition.

Gorbachev was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October 1990 for his willingness to preside over the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet empire in East Europe. But the crucial decision to refuse to use Soviet troops to maintain order in the communist bloc was taken not by Gorbachev in 1988, but by Yury Andropov in 1981. In the face of the Solidarity movement in Poland, the then-KGB head Andropov persuaded General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev that it would be counterproductive for the Soviet Union to repeat Prague 1968 by invading Poland — not least because the army was bogged down in Afghanistan. Poland's communist leaders would have to fix the problem themselves — mainly through martial law, which bought them a few more years in control. In 1988, Gorbachev was merely stating publicly what had already been de facto Soviet policy since 1981.

Great powers must adapt to the changing character of the global system if they are to stay on

top. Leaders must think ahead and not merely build on recent successes. Neither the politicians nor the generals should be fighting the last war. Stalin made that typical error in his strategic choices. He imagined a repeat of World War II and yet another round of imperial conflict. His successors paid the exorbitant price and so did two generations of Soviet citizens.

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