The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Who Killed the Soviet Union?

By Sergei Baburin

December 26, 2011



Twenty years ago, on Dec. 12, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Republic ratified the Belavezha Accords. This agreement, which was signed four days earlier by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Ukrainian leader Leonid Kravchuk and Belarussian leader Stanislav Shushkevich, dissolved the Soviet Union with a stroke of three pens followed by a hasty vote in parliament.

As a Supreme Soviet deputy during this turbulent time, my speech in parliament opposing this ratification was one of the most difficult of my life — not only because it went against the majority opinion, but also because of the feeling of despair gripping everyone. The walls of the room in which we met seemed to exude a tragic sense of hopelessness, and yet many experienced a naive sense of euphoria over what they mistakenly thought was a "historical achievement."

Why were Russia's lawmakers and citizens —not to mention the KGB and military — so indifferent to this destructive and fateful adventurism of Yeltsin, Kravchuk and Shushkevich?

Some of the answers to these questions can be found in the following:

- The Soviet planned economy had almost completely come to a halt;
- The monopoly of Marxist-Leninist ideology left Soviet society in a spiritual and political vacuum that intensified the search for alternatives;
- The people's desire for basic consumer goods — and the Kremlin's inability to recognize the importance of this elementary desire — led to the emergence of a pervasive shadow economy that was incompatible with the principles of socialism;
- The weakening of the ideological underpinnings of society coupled with the nearly lifeless condition of religion in Russia led to increased interethnic tensions;
- The state campaign against alcohol and the drop in world oil prices drained government coffers, sharply limiting maneuvering room in domestic policy for the Communist Party.

There were also man-made factors behind the Soviet Union's growing internal crisis. They included the following:

- For decades, foreign states tried to destabilize the Soviet Union. They ultimately succeeded in establishing anti-socialist and anti-Soviet forces within society;
- The senior Communist Party leadership allowed control of the media to pass into the hands of "agents of influence" at a time when state counter-propaganda measures had become ineffective;
- A number of activists advocating change joined forces to disrupt food supplies to Moscow and Leningrad, creating an artificially induced, widespread food shortage from 1989 to 1991.

But why didn't Soviet citizens arise to defend their country from collapse? Why did the majority of Supreme Soviet deputies and other high-ranking public officials give in to the collusion committed by Yeltsin, Kravchuk and Shushkevich?

One of the most important reasons was the failed putsch of August 1991, after which the staunchest advocates of preserving the Soviet Union were removed from their posts, discredited or arrested. Thus, the movement to save the Soviet Union was all but deprived of its leadership. Meanwhile, the people had lost all faith in Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who was incapable of stopping the growth in the country's interethnic conflicts, separatism and social and economic degradation.

Yet the Soviet Union retained enormous potential for development. It could have continued to exist — perhaps in a slightly different form, but remaining as a federation of states with Moscow as the federal center. Under the right leadership and reforms, the Soviet Union could have recovered from its 1991 crisis to become a strong, healthy country — one based on the traditional values of Russian civilization — as well as a global superpower. There was no reason to throw the baby out with the bath water.

In this context, it is important to remember that 76 percent of the people from the Soviet republics that took part in the referendum on March 17, 1991, voted to preserve the Soviet Union. And they did so despite the growing crisis of confidence in the Moscow leadership and attempts by the democratic movement to discredit the idea of unity with calls to vote down the referendum.

That is why the proponents of the Belavezha Accords tried to hide the destruction of the Soviet Union behind the smokescreen of a new Commonwealth of Independent States,

disingenuously promising that the new CIS would provide greater stability, democracy and prosperity than the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, ordinary people were far too willing to believe these fairy tales.

Of course, there were purely practical considerations as well. Gorbachev's fundamental inability to rule the country led to the widespread desire to remove him from office by any means possible in fall 1991. The public understood that the ship of the Soviet Union was about to collide with a iceberg, and the captain had no interest whatsoever in trying to stave off disaster. As one of my senior Communist colleagues in parliament said at the time, "First we'll get rid of Gorbachev and then we'll regroup."

The Soviet Union did not die from old age. It was killed by a group of opportunists — some of whom were deceived and driven by naive hopes of a better future, while others were driven by a craving for power and a greedy desire to distribute government property into private hands.

Sergei Baburin, who served as a deputy in the Supreme Soviet from 1990 to 1993, is dean of the Russian State University of Trade and Economics.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/12/26/who-killed-the-soviet-union-a11642