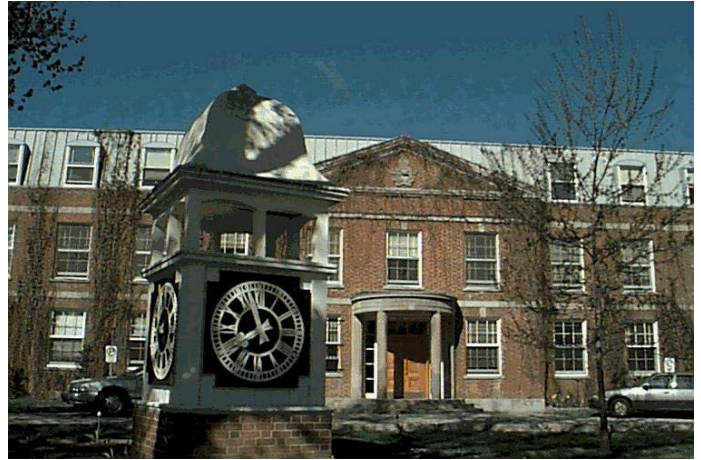


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Arm Wrestling for the Largest Country on Earth:

The Role of the Leaders of the USSR in the Collapse of the State

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JCSP 40

Exercise Solo Flight

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Arm Wrestling for the Largest Country on Earth: The Role of the Leaders of the USSR in the Collapse of the State

By Major J.R.C.A. Lafrenière

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Regardless how many times it has been said in the last two decades, the unpredictable fall of the Soviet Union took the entire world by surprise. Over twenty years later, people are still trying to make sense of the fact that a super power such as the USSR could vanish into oblivion so rapidly. Numerous factors and explanations were proposed to describe the conditions that set the stage for the collapse of the Soviet Union. Much was written on the events of the preceding decade, which set the stages for the fall of communism in Europe. While many refer to 1989 as the end of the Cold War, it is important to remember that following the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the USSR still struggled for another two years in an attempt to stabilize and maintain some of its status in the world. What then, led to its destruction? The literature is full of arguments to suggest that factors such as; economic struggle, the Reagan administration, or advances of information technologies were responsible for the downfall of the communist empire.

Notwithstanding the economic and political context of the 1980s, the leaders within the USSR played a role in the event that led to the ultimate dissolution of the Soviet state in 1991. As described by political science professor and Soviet affairs expert Archie Brown, the structure of government within the Soviet Union concentrated a lot of power at the top of its hierarchy¹. Consequently, official leaders within the USSR enjoyed tremendous power to influence the course of events. The essay will describe how, within the context of the reform of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991, the

¹ Archie Brown and Liliia Shevtsova, *Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin: Political Leadership in Russia's Transition* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2001), 1.

two most prevalent internal political leaders, Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, were agents who contributed directly to the collapse of the USSR.

The analysis of this topic will first begin with a description of the context preceding and surrounding the events leading up to the fall of the USSR. It will include a discussion on the often-suggested counter-argument that the leaders were only along for the ride and that the collapse would have happened the same way regardless. The paper will then have an overview of the intent, motivations and actions of both Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Finally, the examination will conclude with an analysis of how the context and the interactions between the Soviet and Russian leaders interplayed in directly contributing to the collapse of the USSR.

The years 1989 and 1990 marked an important time in political history. A series of revolutions hit almost all of the Eastern bloc countries that were within the sphere of influence of the USSR. One by one, countries such as Poland, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic, and Czechoslovakia conducted deep transformation within their state, which led to the installment of free election and the termination of their communist style economy.

The newly gained ability of these states to choose their destiny freely inspired other states under Soviet control to pursue independently minded ideologies. The three small Baltic republics that were part of the USSR, namely Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, broke away from the Soviet Union and regained their long repressed sovereignty.²

Harvard director of Cold War studies, Mark Kramer, suggest that the revolutions of 1989 had an impact as far as in the Ukraine Soviet Socialist Republic, where ideas of greater independence (although not complete independence) from the USSR was developing at the time.³ Ultimately, the events of 1989 constitute a marked departure from the previous Brezhnev doctrine of maintenance of communism by all means by the Soviet Union.

The day Poland held its first free contested elections, June 4, 1989, a completely different scenario played out in China, where the communist government took violent repressive measures to quell protests for more democracy. The crackdown in Tiananmen Square stood in sharp contrast to the events unfolding in Eastern Europe, but it provided another example of a large population discontent with totalitarian and communism regime. The highly criticized violent intervention of the Chinese government had repercussions that left an ambivalent impression on the use of violence all the way into the USSR.⁴

It is often believed that the Soviet Union's path was inevitably set towards destruction and that whoever was sitting in the seats of power when it happens were nothing but powerless witnesses. Such misconception, however, is not warranted. As Archie Brown reports, the policies put in place by Mikhail Gorbachev were novel and not stemming from anybody else within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.⁵ Assistant

² Mark Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 1)," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 4 (Fall2003, 2003), 205.

³ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁴ Mark Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 6, no. 4 (Fall2004, 2004), 34.

⁵ Archie Brown, "Perestroika and the End of the Cold War," *Cold War History* 7, no. 1 (02, 2007), 9.

editor of *Commentary*, Seth Mandel agrees with this assessment and reported: "... his reforms [Gorbachev] were sweeping and without precedent and undeniably hastened an end that might have taken decades otherwise."⁶

It is also important to note that Gorbachev acted in ways that was in stark opposition to his predecessors when dealing with the Eastern European problems, and the collapse of power in the Soviet Union. Archie Brown reported that former Soviet leaders were prone to resort to repression and force to assert their view.⁷ Another view is that: "The Politburo would never have chosen Gorbachev to lead the country in 1985 had its members possessed any inkling of the reforms he would adopt – especially if they had known that so many of these reforms were destined to fail!"⁸ Consequently, the choice of leadership style chosen by Gorbachev had a tremendous impact on the events that followed.

Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev became the seventh (and last) leader of the Soviet Union in 1985. Over the seven years that followed, he presided over a series of reforms of a magnitude previously never observed in the USSR, which ultimately led to its dissolution in 1991. It is important to note, however, that Gorbachev never intended to destroy the Soviet state; on the contrary, he fought with all his might to preserve the

⁶ Seth Mandel, "The Death of the Soviet Union, 20 Years Later," *Commentary* 132, no. 5 (12, 2011), 30.

⁷ Archie Brown, "The Gorbachev Factor Revisited," *Problems of Post-Communism* 58, no. 4 (Jul, 2011), 63.

⁸ James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014) 125.

Union.⁹ Moreover, he believed such a reform process was possible, and would set the country up on a sound footing.

Gorbachev came to power with fresh ideas of improving the Soviet state. His intent was to revitalize the old stagnating system of the USSR, and bring the country to a modern and open status.¹⁰ He introduced the term *perestroika* (reconstruction) as the label for the changes he was engineering in the Soviet state. Gorbachev himself stated that the reasons for his reforms were: "... born out of the realization that problems internal development in our country were ripe, even overripe, for a solution. New approaches and types of action were needed to escape the downward spiral of crisis..."¹¹ Gorbachev strongly believed that people should be given freedom of expression in the Soviet state. His concept of *glasnost* (openness) removed most of the measures of censorships and of penalties for opposing the regime's views.¹²

Gorbachev wanted to hold on to the ideals of socialism, however, he did not believe in maintaining a system of authoritarian governance focused on repression and on imposing its will through harsh control. In conversation with his longtime friend Zdeněk Mlynář, previous secretary of the Czech communist party, Gorbachev declared: "I concluded that Lenin had seen that his efforts had failed, that democracy for the mass of the people had in practice been stifled. And so for me the primary slogan to put forward in

⁹ Brown and Shevtsova, *Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin: Political Leadership in Russia's Transition*, 12.

¹⁰ Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor Revisited*, 57.

¹¹ Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, *On My Country and the World* [Razmyshleniia o proshlom i budushchem.] (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 56.

¹² Kramer, *The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)*, 15.

1985 was more democracy, more socialism.”¹³ This quote encapsulates well the intent of the reasoning behind what he tried to accomplish. While he did conduct a “shift to the right” late in his tenure as leader of the USSR, where he embraced a more conservative approach to power and the economy, he did so to accommodate the political climate at the time and without completely compromising his values.¹⁴

Another very important part of Gorbachev’s approach was his aversion for the use of violence, which he saw as the resource of very last resort. As early as the funeral of his predecessor in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev is reported to have said to the leaders of the Communist parties of the satellite countries not to count on Soviet armed intervention to maintain their government in place.¹⁵ Gorbachev did not believe that using repression and violence to maintain communism was worth the social price to pay for legitimacy in the end.¹⁶ In conversation with Zdeněk Mlynář, he stated that: “... the use of force as a method of long-term resolution of fundamental problem is unacceptable.”¹⁷ Gorbachev’s words proved true when he decided not to intervene during the revolutions of 1989.

Overall, Mikhail Gorbachev was a well intention leader who wished to improve his country and make it a better place to live for all its citizens. He embraced the idea of socialism, but at the same time, he wished for democracy and openness in the USSR.

¹³ Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, Zdeněk Mlynář and George Shriver, *Conversations with Gorbachev: On Perestroika, the Prague Spring, and the Crossroads of Socialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 67.

¹⁴ Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 269.

¹⁵ Brown, *Perestroika and the End of the Cold War*, 3.

¹⁶ Brown and Shevtsova, *Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin: Political Leadership in Russia's Transition*, 23.

¹⁷ Gorbachev, Mlynář and Shriver, *Conversations with Gorbachev: On Perestroika, the Prague Spring, and the Crossroads of Socialism*, 128.

Additionally, he was a pacifist who believed that violence should only be used in extreme circumstances.

Gorbachev's most dedicated opponent on the domestic political scene within the Soviet Union was Boris Nicolayevich Yeltsin. This bold and outspoken politician climbed the ranks of Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU) all the way to becoming the First Secretary for Moscow as well as a Politburo candidate. Following a controversial declaration that Yeltsin made to criticize the party, he lost his position and promising career within the center of the CPSU. He eventually made a comeback in politics through the democratic route and actually became the president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) and the first president of the independent Russian Federation.

Yeltsin was an ambitious man who aspired to gain power. Archie Brown suggests that some of Yeltsin's actions to destabilize the Soviet Union was in attempt to gain greater power as the president of Russia.¹⁸ Yeltsin was: "someone who, on his own admission, strove to be number one, hated being subordinate..."¹⁹ Coupled with the fact that he was ousted from the CPSU, it is reasonable to believe that he held particular resentment towards his former leaders while he was still active within the party. In his book, *Struggle For Russia*, Yeltsin is highly critical of Gorbachev: "... there was a purely moral reason. I found intolerable Gorbachev's double dealings during the tragedy at

¹⁸ Brown and Shevtsova, *Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin: Political Leadership in Russia's Transition*, 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

Vilnius and couldn't forgive him for burying the 500-Day Program so quickly.”²⁰ The strong language of this statement is a good example of the deep resentment that Yeltsin felt about the leadership of the Soviet Union.

Boris Yeltsin made a reputation for himself for being a rebel against the institutions of the Soviet Union. Mandel summarizes Yeltsin in a serious way: “... a revolutionary insurgent with popular support has only one goal: to tear down the establishment. He had no plan for moving forward after that.”²¹ Yeltsin's discourse towards the bureaucracy is as harsh, if not worse than his words for Gorbachev. His assessment of the Soviet institutions of the time was that: “... the fascist Stalinist system gradually turned into ‘velvet’ totalitarianism...”²² In his autobiography, he portrays a very harsh portrait of the apparat: “... the Central Committee really does produce absolutely nothing at all, except paper. And the success of what it does is gauged by those mountains of utterly useless information – sheets, reports, summaries, analysis, projects, and plans.”²³ In the end, Boris Yeltsin was clear about what he thought of the Soviet institutions.

If Boris had an attribute that made him the most suitable candidate for elections in a newly democratic state, it was his ability to interact with the population. Stephen Kotkin, director of program in Russian studies at Princeton University, describes Yeltsin's ability: “As a provincial first secretary, Yeltsin excelled at what is described in

²⁰ Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin and Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, *The Struggle for Russia* [Zapeski Presidenti.], 1 American ed. (New York: Belka Publishing Co. : Times Books, 1994), 23-24.

²¹ Mandel, *The Death of the Soviet Union, 20 Years Later*, 31.

²² Yeltsin and Fitzpatrick, *The Struggle for Russia*, 7.

²³ Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin, *Against the Grain: An Autobiography* (New York ; Toronto: Summit Books, 1990), 155.

his biography as the 'bain de foule.'²⁴ He rode mass transit conspicuously, appeared live on local television, and met blue collar-workers and students, answering written questions for hours."²⁵ There is no doubt that Yeltsin's talent to relate with common people, the electorate, served him well throughout this era of his career. With *glasnost* making public opinion more important than ever in the USSR, Yeltsin's connection with his supporters help to greatly increase and consolidate the legitimacy of his power within the Russian government.

Overall, Boris Yeltsin established himself as an ambitious politician who strove for power. He carried a significant load of resentment towards the institutions of the USSR, which probably led him to be much of a rebel on the political scene. Regardless, he managed to remain in politics even after being ousted, and he aspired to the highest position with the Russian government.

All the factors described above played a role in the collapse of the Soviet Union. In isolation, the context alone or either leader presented above would not have likely been the sole reason for the destruction of a state. The interactions between them however, played an instrumental role in the dissolution of the country. First, the political unrest in and around the USSR put a great deal of pressure on the leadership of the Soviet State. Then, Gorbachev's policies of Glasnost and Perestroika opened the door to criticism and created the mechanisms under which his enemy gained enough power to take him down.

²⁴ Yeltsin and Fitzpatrick, *The Struggle for Russia*, 63.

²⁵ Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, Updated ed. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 119.

The revolutions of 1989 had a resounding impact on the Soviet Union, inducing pressures on the Soviet state from both the inside and outside. Firstly, the events of 1989 projected an image of vulnerability of the USSR. As Kramer remarked: “The growing perception among opposition groups – and among wider public – [was] that the Soviet regime might prove to be as fragile as the governments in Eastern Europe...”²⁶ The very fact that the USSR collapsed two years after the revolutions in the Eastern European countries puts weight behind that statement. Nonetheless, the image that was projected put enormous pressure on the government of the USSR to maintain security and stability. In the end however, Gorbachev’s non-violent ways were too soft to impose this stability. Diplomatic historian James Graham Wilson assessed that: “People took risks because they did not think that Gorbachev would crack down on them. He proved them right. To intervene would have sacrificed the new world order Gorbachev hoped to construct.”²⁷ The pressure coming from the opponents of the survival of the USSR benefited from this vulnerability to further their goal.

Internally, the pressure came for the fact that the establishment could not react adequately to solve the problem of state. Yeltsin’s aversion for the bureaucracy and its limitations may have been justified in some ways. The degree of inefficiency of the USSR was exasperating the problems of its citizens. For example, food shortages were all too common in the last days of the USSR. Martin McCauley, who was a senior lecturer in

²⁶ Kramer, *The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)*, 21.

²⁷ Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* 102.

Soviet and East Europe, describes examples of inefficiency of the Soviet administration about food production and distribution.²⁸ In this case, over 20 percent of the amount of food produced in certain sectors of the agriculture sector would never reach the consumer. The sheer size and bloating of the bureaucracy itself is to blame for this inability to achieve reasonable goals. This kind of pressure from inside the country discredited the Soviet Union and its administration towards its citizens. Ultimately, however, it is the inability of the leadership that is to blame in this case. Wilson summarizes this situation perfectly: “Communism’s persistent stagnation undermined the cohesion of the Eastern bloc and undercut the Soviet Challenge to capitalist and democratic institutions.”²⁹

The direct actions and policies of Mikhail Gorbachev had a direct impact on the events that led to the collapse of the USSR. The first of those policies was *glasnost*. The frame of openness set the stage for a volley of criticism that in the end, irrevocably tarnished the image of the Soviet Union.

The motivation behind *glasnost* was noble. It was meant to lift the veil of censorship and allow freedom of expression to all citizens of the USSR. The debate that took place following its implementation pitted ideologies that clashed with each other. As reported by former US ambassador to the USSR, Jack Matlock, *Glasnost* allowed the population to start questioning the fundamental premise of the CPSU, its constitutionally protected central role as leading institution in the country and its ideology of communism

²⁸ Martin McCauley, *Gorbachev and Perestroika* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 7.

²⁹ Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* 119.

around the world.³⁰ These values could not be reconciled with new propagating ways of thinking which put priority on such concepts as the ‘common interests of mankind.’ The weakening of the CPSU resulted in the weakening of the Soviet state.

Freedom of speech also gave significant importance to public opinion in the design and application of government policy. It allowed the citizenry to criticize the decision of the government, which was never allowed previously in the USSR. By 1989, Glasnost was a well-established practice in the Soviet state. In the following years, the success of the previous Warsaw pact countries that parted with communism and embraced liberal democratic systems were consistently reported, if not publicized, in the USSR. This spillover effect influenced the population in parting with Soviet ideals of communism and spurred nationalism in many of the republics of the Soviet state. As such, Glasnost as implemented by Gorbachev contributed to further weakening of the USSR.

The second policy put in place by Gorbachev, which greatly contributed to the USSR’s demise, is that of *perestroika*. This endeavour was designed to restructure the state in a more efficient, more legitimate, and more democratic organization. However, Perestroika backfired on Gorbachev in a way that it created a forum for his fierce opponent to gain enough power to overthrow him.

In line with creating more democracy in the Soviet Union, Gorbachev introduced free and contested elections in the USSR by 1989. The creation of the USSR Congress of

³⁰ Jack F. Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2004), 317.

People's Deputies was the first attempt to inject real democracy in Soviet society. Unfortunately, for Gorbachev, it had a significant side effect in allowing Boris Yeltsin, who would become his fiercest opponent, back into a political seat. Yeltsin himself gave credit to Gorbachev for this feat: "...Gorbachev's *perestroika* has set a new precedent: A dismissed politician is now given the opportunity of returning to political life."³¹ Given his flair for politics, his charisma, and his people skills with the electorate, Yeltsin had no problem being elected as a deputy. It is also interesting to note that the creation of USSR Congress of People's Deputies allowed numerous candidates from the Baltic republics to gain political legitimacy to push for more independence or sovereignty of their respective states. Overall, the free elections achieved their goal of creating some democracy in the Soviet Union, it did however, greatly weaken the Soviet state itself.

With all of his resentment and anger towards the CPSU, its leaders, Gorbachev, and the Soviet institutions, Boris Yeltsin was finally in a position from which he could attempt to gain enough power to eventually contribute in taking down the USSR. Within the political context of the time, the wheels were in motion to provide the republics within the union with more and more power. Boris Yeltsin would take advantage of that momentum. In June 1990, he managed to get himself elected by the Russian parliament to become its chair.³² Gorbachev's next move was to create the position of President of the Soviet Union for him to occupy. This would provide him with a greater degree of

³¹ Yeltsin, *Against the Grain: An Autobiography*, 14.

³² Kramer, *The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)*, 59.

independence from the hard line of the CPSU.³³ It did however, pave the way for the republics to emulate this structure and create their own presidencies. Shortly thereafter, Boris Yeltsin became President of the Russian SRFSR.

Following his accession to the Presidency, Boris Yeltsin started lobbying strongly for obtaining more power and independence for Russia. In an address he made to the Congress of People's Deputies soon after being elected, Yeltsin called for a Russian declaration of independence. This spur of nationalist fiber spillover to the other republics of the union, and in a short period of time, numerous other declarations of sovereignty were made. Gorbachev after the fact assessment of this declaration was included in his book: "... it is evident to me that the main orientation of Yeltsin and his entourage was to pursue a course aimed at the dissolution of the Soviet Union, at taking control of Russia, so as to seize power for themselves."³⁴ Whether or not Gorbachev's assessment of Yeltsin's motives is accurate, history has shown that this is exactly what happened. The democratic process through which the legislature and presidency of the republics gained legitimacy only contributed to reducing the power of the central government of the USSR.

Another unintended side effect of Gorbachev's policy was that it diminished his influence and control over the bureaucracy and the internal working of the CPSU. By 1990, there are numerous examples of how Gorbachev was losing some control over the military. For example, Kramer details the instance in which the military acted on its own

³³ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

³⁴ Gorbachev, *On My Country and the World*, 111.

to derail or impede the Conventional Force Europe treaty that called for a reduction of the number of soldiers and equipment the USSR had in Eastern Europe.³⁵ Kotkin assesses the cause of Gorbachev's power vacuum as: "...having sidelined the Communist Party and transformed the parliament, Gorbachev found himself with only indirect levers over the Soviet legislature and the government."³⁶ Such irrelevance is a good example that the power of the President of the Soviet was diminishing and in a country with such highly centralized power, this could only mean that the power of the state was diminishing.

Eventually, many people felt like Mikhail Gorbachev was losing complete control of the Soviet Union. In reality, many of his close assistants and deputies were already plotting to take over and remove him. Boris Yeltsin's assessment of Gorbachev's actual influence just before the coup may be a little biased, but nonetheless it is an indication of the climate that surrounded the president at the time: "Neither could Gorbachev rely on the parliament that had once been obedient to him. The Supreme Soviet was entirely controlled by Lukyanov. Its deputies were obviously opposed to economic reform, ..., and Gorbachev's perestroika as a whole."³⁷ This gloomy statement set the stage for the failed three days coup that followed.

Between August 19 and 21, 1991, Gorbachev was held under house arrest in his dacha in the Crimea, while some of his ministers tried to take the country via a military coup. Frustration over the events of Eastern Europe and the rapidly reducing influence of

³⁵ Mark Kramer, The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 3), *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 1 (Winter2005, 2005), 44.

³⁶ Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 172.

³⁷ Yeltsin and Fitzpatrick, *The Struggle for Russia*, 50.

the CPSU over the Soviet population pushed some of his followers to attempt to take over the reign of the state. Much has been written about the coup itself, but what will be pointed out here is how Boris Yeltsin gained a lot of popularity during and after the coup was orchestrated. Yeltsin almost right away condemned the coup and loudly voiced his concerns about the legality and legitimacy of such a maneuver.³⁸ The climactic moment of the resistance against the coup was an instance of Yeltsin demonstrating composure when he climbed on a tank sent to his house of government to monitor him, and addressed the people protesting from there. As he recalls: "... I went downstairs to the people. I clambered onto a tank, and straightened myself up tall. Perhaps I felt clearly at that moment that we were winning, that we couldn't lose. I had a sense of utter clarity, complete unity with the people..."³⁹ The reaction to the coup saw Boris Yeltsin acting at his best, with courage and resolution. As such, he came out of the crisis much more popular than ever, while Gorbachev lost even more influence. As Kotkin puts it: "...but it was Yeltsin's mounting of a hostile tank in Moscow to address a crowd of resisters and news cameras that gave rise to the comforting myth of the triumph of "democrats" over Communists."⁴⁰ This continuing trend of power reduction for the President of the Soviet Union continued to diminish to significance of the central state.

Admirably, and even though his influence was becoming insignificant, Mikhail Gorbachev made one last ditch effort to save something out of the Soviet Union in the means of the new Treaty of the Union. This effort, which began before the coup, was

³⁸ Yeltsin, *Against the Grain: An Autobiography*, 77-79.

³⁹ Yeltsin and Fitzpatrick, *The Struggle for Russia*, 68-69.

⁴⁰ Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 129.

designed to create a new union with decentralized power that would include as many republics of the USSR as possible. By late November of 1991, a large number of the republics were pulling out of the agreement.⁴¹ Shortly after, Boris Yeltsin used his influence with the leaders of both the Ukraine and Byelorussia to establish the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), an economic partnership between the three Slavic republics that provided a perfect alternative to the new Union.⁴² A declaration coming out of the CIS meeting signaled that the leaders of those three republics had declared that the USSR had ceased to exist.⁴³ The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was officially dissolved shortly thereafter, on December 25, 1991.

When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union in 1985, nobody could reasonably predict that, within less than seven years, that Eastern Europe countries would be transitioning to market economy and democracy, that communism would have virtually disappeared, and that the USSR would crumble on its own foundations. Many factors played a role in the series of events that lead to the dissolution of the largest country in the world.

The policies enacted by Mikhail Gorbachev upon taking power, *glasnost* and *perestroika*, backfired on him and contributed, to a large extent, to the collapse of the Soviet state. Allowing the Eastern European countries to choose their own destiny had a ripple effect back into the USSR itself, which, coupled with the openness of *glasnost*; practically publicize alternative options to that of the Soviet way of doing things. In turn, *glasnost*

⁴¹ Yeltsin and Fitzpatrick, *The Struggle for Russia*, 110.

⁴² Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 136.

⁴³ Gorbachev, *On My Country and the World*, 151.

also opened the door to a flurry of criticism of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and of its control over the Soviet state. The democratization of the country opened the door to Boris Yeltsin to get back into politics. Yeltsin became Gorbachev's most fervent opponent, and fueled with resentment and disdain over the Soviet machine and the CPSU fought to reduce the influence of the USSR into oblivion. Yeltsin gained power and legitimacy through the process of democratization open by *perestroika* to become the President of Russia. Under the umbrella of Glasnost, he could openly criticize the Soviet Union and he was able to gain even more legitimacy through strong popular. Eventually, empowered by Gorbachev's reforms, he was able to move forward motions and alliances that finally destroyed the Soviet Union in December 1991. As such, it is reasonable to conclude that, within the context of the reform of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991, the two most prevalent internal political leaders, Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, were agents who contributed directly to the collapse of the USSR

Within a matter of less than seven years, the only superpower other than the United States of America crumbled into 15 different pieces of sovereign states. Two decades later, significant levels of tension, problems and conflict remains within the territories of the former Soviet Union. An understanding of the process through which the Soviet Union broke down is necessary, to even attempt, to comprehend the contemporary situation in Eurasia. The events that went on between 1989 and 1991 had a significant influence in setting the stage for the two decades that would follow, and explain in part the current struggles and aspiration of Russia. The next step in tracking the evolution of power in Russia would be to analyze the following on power structure left from the

collapse of the USSR and link it with contemporary considerations, especially when analyzing how Russia deals with its immediate neighbors, who were formerly republics within the old USSR.

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