

**GRADE 12****HISTORY****IF 2. CAUSES FOR THE COLLAPSE OF THE USSR****A. INTERNAL CAUSES****GORBACHEV – THE MAN**

Undoubtedly the most important internal cause for the collapse of the USSR was Mikhail Gorbachev, himself. Not that he set out intentionally to destroy the Soviet Union, on the contrary. His aim was to improve it and make it wealthier. He also never meant to see an end to communism, to his dying day he was a communist. But he initiated events and policies that spiralled out of his control.....

**GORBACHEV'S POLICIES OF REFORM**

As discussed in Information Sheet 1, the policies of Glastnost, Perestroika and Democratisation were the most instrumental internal reasons for the collapse of the USSR.

**A FAILING ECONOMY**

The arms race expenditure had led to bankruptcy in the Soviet Union. On top of that the Soviets were dependent on the USA for wheat and other commodities.

Internally too, the standards of living were very low with many people living below the bread line.

**B. EXTERNAL CAUSES FOR THE COLLAPSE OF THE USSR****CHERNOBYL**

Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on 11<sup>th</sup> March 1985. The Chernobyl nuclear disaster occurred in the USSR the following year. This horrific incident made Gorbachev realise that communism needed to be reformed in Russia.

**AFGHANISTAN**

In 1979 the USSR had sent troops into Afghanistan, to back a newly elected pro-Soviet government there. It was being challenged by the Mujaheddin, anti-communist Islamic fighters backed by Pakistan and the USA. The Soviet government wanted them defeated because it feared that Islamic extremisms might influence the large Muslim population living in the USSR. Despite superior weapons, the Soviet armed forces could not crush the

resistance. By 1985, over 20 000 Soviet troops had died in Afghanistan and the war was becoming increasingly unpopular in the USSR. About a million Afghans had died, thousands were refugees and the country was devastated. Soviet involvement in Afghanistan has been likened to American involvement in Vietnam; it became a war that could not be won and continually drained Soviet resources and morale. Gorbachev decided to withdraw from Afghanistan, and by 1989, all Soviet troops had left.

There is a slight irony surrounding the USA's involvement in Afghanistan; the people that the US armed and supported are the very same people now involved in guerrilla attacks on the USA. Eg Twin Towers Attack

### **IMPROVED RELATIONS WITH THE WEST**

In 1986, Gorbachev met with the American president, Ronald Reagan, in an attempt to improve diplomatic and trade relations with the West.

- In 1987, he signed the intermediate range nuclear forces treaty with the USA.
- In 1988, he began withdrawing Soviet forces from Afghanistan.
- In 1988, Gorbachev recalled large numbers of troops from Eastern Europe; this allowed the satellite Soviet Nations to determine their own affairs. Democratic revolutions occurred throughout eastern Europe and communism collapsed in eastern Europe.

### **THE ROLE OF PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN**

President Reagan needs to be credited with meeting Gorbachev halfway. Instead of pulling a power-play, he allowed the Soviets to 'fall with dignity'. He didn't take advantage.

### **NATIONALISM**

The USSR consisted of 15 Soviet Republics. Roughly half of its population was Russian and the other half was made up of at least a hundred different national minorities. Some of the minorities now began to demand their freedom. They did not like the way their own cultures and languages had been undermined and replaced with Russian. Nor did they like the fact that Russians held many of the top positions in their republics and the most decisions were taken in Moscow. Nationalism was especially strong in the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In 1989 Gorbachev allowed free elections to a new parliament, the Congress of the People's Deputies, and the leadership positions for 15 republics. As the national minorities started to claim their independence, the unity of the USSR came under threat.

In contrast to his policy of non-intervention in eastern Europe, Gorbachev used force to crush nationalist uprisings inside the USSR. Soviet troops were sent to stop independence movements in Georgia and the Baltic republics because he was not prepared to allow the disintegration of the USSR.

**THE 1991 COUP**

In August 1991, pro-Soviet conservatives in the government and leading military officers staged a coup in Moscow in an attempt to overthrow Gorbachev, whom they arrested when he was on holiday in the Crimea. The coup failed when Yeltsin climbed onto a tank in a Moscow street and called on the soldiers to mutiny on the workers to oppose the coup and for Gorbachev to be reinstated. Even though the coup failed, it ended Gorbachev's dream of reviving the USSR. Realizing how weak the central government was, the Baltic republics declared their independence. The leaders of the other 12 former Soviet republics announced in December 1991 that the USSR would be replaced by a Commonwealth of Independent States. Gorbachev finally resigned, and the Soviet hammer and sickle flag was lowered for the last time. The Soviet Union had vanished.