

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SOVIET UNION
OR
"What is Peristroika Anyway?"

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THE THING THAT IMPRESSED ME most about Gibbons' great work, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire was the clever way the author put his finger on the reasons for the empire's dissolution. As I recall, it had something to do with people's immorality and the government's inability to govern, and I'll bet that would apply to the decline and fall of almost everything. Not that I think people are more immoral just before they fall--I've seen some pretty raunchy folks who seemed to be on the rise, but immorality is so wide spread that I think you could cite it as part of the demise of just about everything that has ever demised, and be pretty safe. And as for the government's inability to govern, well, the less said about that the better. So you'll forgive me if I do not try to tell you why the Soviet Union rose and fell but just try to summarize what happened, both as I read about it in my European history course in high school and as we observed the events unfolding on radio, television, and the daily newspapers.

I PAID ATTENTION TO THESE events, because like most American boys of my time, I thought that some day I, or my children (or perhaps both) would fight in a war with the Soviet Union, and that that war would probably be known as World War III. To me and my school mates, it was not a question of whether we would have such a war, just a question of when. It was my grandfather's conviction (and he was not alone) that Moscow should be bombed before the Soviets developed nuclear power. (My grandfather was not much of a diplomat, and everybody knew he had a bad temper.)

BUT TO GET BACK TO my topic. The rise of the Soviet Union started long before 1917, of course, because the ability of the czars* of Russia to govern wasn't all that good either. Tsar** Nicholas and his lovely wife Alexandra assumed power in what was then Russia in 1894. The Czarina was pretty, but she was actually a foreigner, though kin to Nicholas, so none of the Russian people felt they could trust her. Personally, I always

thought she was pretty nice, but she had no gift for politics and kept saying the wrong things. Some of her comments made Marie Antoinette's faux pas about eating cake seem like first class diplomacy.

PROBABLY THE WORST THING SHE did was to get involved with the noted but very unpopular religious fanatic, Rasputin, who was also a foreigner. Rasputin was a man born before his time. He would have made a great televangelist, but of course, there was no television in 1905. So he did the next best thing: he went around healing rich people, especially royalty, and made a pretty good living that way. Alexandra was, if nothing else, an affectionate mother, and the tragedy of her and Nicholas' life was a chronically sick offspring named Alexis whom none of the doctors of his day seemed able to help. It seems he had some kind of respiratory disease, as well as hemophilia, which might have been due to all that inter-marriage that went on among the European royal families, but no doctor was willing to say so at the time.

RASPUTIN NEVER ACTUALLY CURED HIM, but he seemed to make him better several times when he was at death's door, so Alexandra was extremely partial to him and made Nicholas be nice to him also. This was difficult, because Rasputin hardly bathed at all, and Nicholas found it hard to stay in the same room with him. Nobody else wanted to be around him much either, except Alexandra, which just shows how strong a mother's love can be. Of course, some of the jealous hangers on in Nicholas' government suggested that there was something else going on between Alexandra and Rasputin, but that was never proved, and I only mention it here for the sake of historical completeness.

RASPUTIN WAS A REMARKABLE, IF very unpopular man. Though he is described by some historians as tall,

muscular, and handsome, you'd laugh at that if I showed you a picture of him right now.

AFTER HE BECAME SO POWERFUL in government, influencing the Czar to hire and fire people, some of the noblemen became quite jealous and decided he had to go. So one night they invited him to a party where they provided him with poisoned wine and cakes, which he ate and drank freely until two in the morning without apparent ill effect. In desperation a Prince Yusopov, who was the host, borrowed a pistol and shot Rasputin, who fell down and first appeared to be dead. Suddenly, however, he jumped up and rushed at Yusopov, who was frightened and ran into the court yard. Once out in the yard, somebody else shot Rasputin two more times, but he still kept coming. Finally, Yusopov picked up a steel bar with which he battered Rasputin's head several times, and then they threw him into the river. Needless to say, that was the end of Rasputin.

OF COURSE RASPUTIN WAS NOT the only reason the people of Russia were upset in 1917. Besides being hungry, cold, and having to wait in long lines for everything, they were upset, because Nicholas did not know how to rule them as well as his grandfather, Tsar Nicholas I, had done. In the old Nicholas' day any kind of insurrection was put down by slaughtering the protesters and banishing the leaders to Siberia where they had to work 18-hour days and where it was really cold. But young Nicholas was an idealist who kept thinking that he could just give some of the rebels light sentences and make them see the error of their ways. That's always a mistake. What they saw, unfortunately, was that that just gave them more time to write anti-royalist tracts and to buy guns from foreigners.

ANOTHER THING THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE were mad about was that they were having to send their young men off to

fight in World War I, though they didn't know at the time that it was World War I, since nobody had told them about World War II, which was still a long way off. But most of them did not know what World War I was all about. After all, how can you explain to a bunch of serfs who have no freedom at all that they are needed to fight a war to keep the world safe for democracy? That might work in an enlightened country like the US of A, but not in St. Petersburg, especially when the temperature is 40 below zero.

SO THINGS WENT FROM BAD to worse in Russia in the winter of 1917, until the peasants finally got enough sticks and stones and hammers and sickles together to fight off the army that was left at home, and oust the royal government. The revolution -- known historically as the February revolution -- started on March 8, International Women's Day, when women factory workers and housewives staged a mass demonstration. The uprising spread so quickly that by March 11 the Duma (the Russian parliament) was dissolved. Communication was so poor, however, most of the members did know they had been dissolved, so they met anyway but to no avail. The revolutionaries then set up a provisional government that was to be run by a committee, which proved to be about as efficient as most other committees that are set up to run something. In short, it failed.

AT THE TIME, VLADIMIR LENIN was hiding out in Finland or Germany, where he had been since 1905 { because he thought that it would be many years before a successful coup could be staged} and Leon Trotsky was the leader of the Communist party. Lenin rushed back to Russia, however, and on October 23, 1917, the Bolsheviks seized power by storming the Winter Palace, and another revolutionary government was set up.

JUST TO SHOW THAT IT really was a humanitarian movement to guarantee peace and security for all mankind, the

rebels herded poor Nicholas and Alexandra and all five of their children into a basement and murdered them, bringing to an end the House of Romanov. Legend has it that one of the girls, named Anastasia, escaped, which provided lots of material for tabloid newspapers and movies who must have discovered 200 Anastasias between 1918 and 1950. That family homicide should have been a clue to somebody that this whole movement was not so humanitarian, but nobody seemed to catch on just yet. In fact a lot of people in Russia and as far away as the United States sang the praises of this great development which was going to guarantee power to the people at last. In fact quite a few Americans even emigrated to the USSR in the 1920's, but most of them returned if they got the opportunity. A lot of them did not.

IN 1924 LENIN DIED, AND there followed a struggle for power between Trotsky and Josef Stalin, who proved to be a very efficient, though ruthless dictator who could make the trains and everything else run on time. By 1929 he had run Trotsky out of the country and had full power. In 1930 he started the first of the great purges, which resulted in nobody knows how many murders, but did much to stabilize the government. In 1939 Trotsky died of some kind of accidental gunshot wound in Mexico.

THE UNITED STATES DID NOT recognize the communist government at first, because it was the opinion of the Republican presidents in office from 1921 until 1933 that if one would ignore communism it would eventually go away, like the common cold. But it did not go away, so the first Democrat elected to the White House in a long time established formal diplomatic relations with the USSR, and the friendly face of Joseph Stalin began to be familiar to Americans.

THE GOVERNMENTS OF LENIN AND later Stalin did all they could to empower the Soviet people. They were

empowered to work 12-hour days and to have the satisfaction that even though they did not make enough money to afford many of the comforts of life, they were a part of the great Russian communist experiment. The already large bureaucracy was made even larger, because since the government owned everything then everybody had to work for the government. Farming and industrial development were stunted at levels hardly better than those in America in the 19th century. Distribution of goods and services was never efficient.

WHEN WW I I BEGAN TO THREATEN, it first helped the Russian economy, just like it did that of the United States, but both powers were dedicated to stopping the spread of evil fascism. Stalin was so dedicated to stopping evil fascism that he signed a non-aggression pact with Adolph Hitler, whereby the Russians and the Germans divided Poland. This was their way of protecting Poland from fascist aggression, and it might have worked except that Hitler proved to be the kind of person who didn't keep his word, and he invaded Poland anyway. This hurt Stalin's feelings quite a lot, so he brought out his famous Red Army against the Nazis, and they fought very bravely.

WORLD WAR I I WAS VERY hard on the Soviet Union because some 20 million people died or were killed, most of them civilians, the same as in most wars. (It is also a little known fact that seven million horses died.) A lot of the Russian officers, who were described as old fashioned, preferred using horses to mechanized vehicles. I never knew why until I read that the United States had supplied them with 400 Studebaker transport trucks. I used to drive a Studebaker, and, frankly, I would have preferred a horse. But one positive development was the USA and the USSR became friends, and a lot of people in this country felt safer in pointing out that they had always considered communism to be a pretty good thing. (They were sure sorry they said that a few years later.) There were a lot of pictures of President Roosevelt

sitting next to Marshall Stalin, both smiling and looking like they were the best of pals, but they were ruined by that old spoiled sport Churchill sitting on the other side of FDR, always looking like he didn't trust Joe Stalin. Everybody agreed that that was quite petty of Churchill (even though he did turn out to be right), so the British people gave him his comeuppance in the very next election.

postwar

AS A RESULT OF THE agreements between the big three, Germany was divided up after WW II, and Stalin extended his benevolent protection to all the countries of Eastern Europe. The Western powers always said that wasn't part of the deal, but Stalin said that's the way he understood it, and besides the Eastern European nations wanted to be part of the communist bloc. All the leaders who opposed it mysteriously committed suicide, so that ought to prove something.

SO THE WESTERN POWERS FORMED the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the Russians formed the Warsaw Pact, and the cold war began in earnest. It lasted for nearly 45 years, and most people agree that it was one of the best wars we ever had. Relatively few people got killed in the cold war, and it was very good for business.

AFTER STALIN DIED IN 1953, Nikita Khrushchev got rid of his rivals and ruled for 11 years. His most notable act was pounding his lectern with his shoe and shouting that the Russians were going to bury the Americans. All that did was make the Americans more determined than ever to prove that capitalism was better than communism and they did prove this by showing that capitalists can spend more money than communists over a longer period of time on weapons that nobody wanted to use before going bankrupt. His next most notable act was sending missiles to Cuba's Fidel Castro, but that made President John F. Kennedy and his

brother mad, and they had an eyeball to eyeball staring match, which JKK won.

AFTER MR. KHRUSHCHEV RETIRED, THE USSR was ruled by a man named Leonid Brezhnev for 18 years, but Brezhnev was so quiet, that we never really got to know him like we had his predecessors. One thing of note, however, was that he and Presidents Johnson and Nixon devised a new kind of war. Since neither wanted the USA to fight the USSR, everybody having agreed that that would mean the destruction of the planet, both decided to show the other how strong they were by fighting another, smaller country.

JOHNSON SENT AMERICAN TROOPS TO teach the North Vietnamese a lesson, but that proved to be a big mistake. It cost too much, the press did not enjoy it, and the American people just got tired of it. So President Nixon finally declared that we had won the war and pulled out, but the Russians never did stop laughing at that. Surprisingly, however, when it came their turn to teach a little country its manners, they made the same mistakes in Afghanistan that we had made in Vietnam. In fact, it was worse, because the Russian people became even more disillusioned, and began to question whether communism really was such a good thing.

AFTER VIETNAM AND BEFORE THE Afghanistan debacle, President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger had set up with Brezhnev what came to be known as detente, which was based on the old Churchillian theorem that "it is better to jaw-jaw than to war-war." Detente made the United States feel safer, and it helped the Soviet Union in many ways. The high point of detente came in 1975, when President Gerald Ford made everybody laugh by falling down the steps of his airplane in Vladivostok. The Russians were so tickled that they signed an agreement barring multiple-warhead missiles. President Jimmy Carter continued to

expand detente, which suited the Russians fine, so he and Brezhnev signed SALT II in 1979. The Russians needed detente, because it was the only way to get American farm products and American technology. It never was clear why American presidents needed it, but it was always cited as a great accomplishment. For the Russians, however, it did not work out so well, because it increased interaction between Soviet citizens and western scientists, journalists, and entertainers. This led to the Russian youth learning how to smoke pot, wear their hair long, and love rock and roll. As one might expect, society began to disintegrate. Many soviet citizens demanded more rights, the Jews wanted to emigrate, and writers and educators wanted to be able to do what writers and educators in the United States do, which the Soviet leaders thought would destroy their social structure. As a result, many of the dissenters were arrested and sent to Siberia.

AFTER BREZHNEV'S DEATH, AN OLD KGB chief named Andropov became dictator, but died two years later and was succeeded by another old man named Chernenko whose reign was even shorter. Finally the politburo ran out of old men who had been around in October of 1917, and in 1985 they elected a young man named Mikhail Gorbachev, who proved to be a great success for two reasons. For one thing he knew a lot about public relations and, for another, his name lent itself to being shortened to "Gorby" and that made him seem like a warm, likeable fellow. He even had a little birthmark on his frontal lobe which some people felt made him down right cuddly. Gorby was a big hit with the news media, especially CNN, because he coined two words "glasnost" and "perestroika." The former meant openness, and that meant that he was always available for interviews, which came in real handy on slow news days. The other stood for restructuring, and nobody knew what that meant until the Soviet Union fell apart.

WHEN RONALD REAGAN BECAME PRESIDENT he picked up on U.S. foreign policy right where John Foster Dulles had left off and frightened all American foreign policy experts by calling the Soviet Union an evil empire and announcing that he was going to set up a Star Wars defense system like the one in the movies. Sam Donaldson thought this might make the Russians angry and hasten the onset of World War III, but the Soviets did not seem to pay much attention to Reagan. They were already worn out with the cold war.

GORBY AND PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN got along real well, so they had a lot of meetings. They would have had more, but their wives didn't like each other, and you know what that means. When asked later what he had done to end the animosity between the U.S. and the USSR, Ronald Reagan just shook his head and said "Gosh."

HISTORY WILL RECORD THAT GORBACHEV did a lot to make the Soviet Union a more open, cooperative, responsible nation, but he had the same problem that has bothered a lot of other leaders, including the last three Kentucky governors: he couldn't make the bureaucrats work efficiently. And since the government owned everything in the Soviet Union, everybody was a bureaucrat, so nobody worked efficiently. Soon the Eastern bloc nations saw that they could break away from the Warsaw pact so they did so, and this caused a lot of the Soviet republics, who never really wanted to be soviet in the first place, think they could do the same thing. To make matters worse, Boris Yeltsin, who liked glasnost and perestroika but didn't like Gorbachev, got elected president of the Republic of Russia and decided that he would save all the little republics the trouble of withdrawing from Russia by having Russia withdraw from the little republics, and he did just that. That meant that there was nobody

left to pay Gorbachev's salary, so he resigned on Christmas day, 1991.

THE RATHER SUDDEN COLLAPSE OF what Ronald Reagan had called the Evil Empire came as a great surprise to everyone, and something of an embarrassment to the CIA. Apparently no one had any idea of the extent to which the Soviet Union had rotted from within, until it was a brittle shell that could no longer stand alone. So much for our government's ability to plan.

AND SO, THE UNION OF Soviet Socialist Republics came to an end, leaving both the Warsaw pact and NATO with a huge arsenal of nuclear and conventional weapons with no war in which to use them. But what of the great Russian communist experiment? Was it a success? Well I'll just leave you with this thought. The chief problems in Russia before the revolution of 1917 were hunger, poverty, lack of industrial development, an inefficient bureaucracy, and winters that were just too cold to suit anyone's taste. After nearly 75 years of communist rule, that government was deposed mainly because of hunger, poverty, lack of industrial development, and an inefficient bureaucracy. Most people having given up on the Russian winters, which sometimes are just ridiculous.

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