

To what extent were Gorbachev's policies the main cause in the dissolution of the Soviet

Union in 1991?

History Internal Assessment

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## Section 1: Identification and Analysis of Sources

This study will investigate to what extent were Gorbachev's policies the main cause in the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The first source I analysed is a quote from the former Soviet Union newspaper, the Pravda. This source is particularly relevant to the investigation because it emphasises the role internal pressures had in the dissolution of the USSR. The second source I have selected for detailed analysis is a quote by conservative historian Paul Johnson in his book "Europe and the Reagan Years". This source provides an alternative factor in the dissolution of the USSR, America's impact.

Source A:

The origin of Source A is from a Soviet public newspaper, the Pravda.<sup>1</sup> On first reflection, one could deduce its purpose is as a public opinion. On this basis, it's is valuable for this investigation because it highlights how the Soviet public concerns over the structure and society of Soviet socialism. It also confirms how Glasnost was well received in the public since people were critiquing the government. The source was written in 1986, therefore shows how people were receptive to the changes made by Glasnost. However, despite being a public newspaper, the Pravda was the official communist party newspaper therefore heavily censored and controlled by the government. The purpose was not only to share an opinion, but to influence the Soviet populace to align their views with the government. As the content was highly regulated, it limits the value of the source as a public opinion. While limited in terms of factual accuracy, the newspaper is valuable in understanding the views of the Communist Party. This extract shows they are promoting Glasnost as well as highlighting the corruption in their Party which they were aiming to solve.

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<sup>1</sup> Current Digest of the Soviet Press, vol. XXXVIII, no. 6, March 12th, 1986

Source B:

The origin of Source B is an article by conservative Historian Paul Johnson.<sup>2</sup> As he is a right-wing Historian, the source is extremely valuable for historians studying Reagan's policies.

Written in 1988, the article presents a primary source opinion of the imminent collapse of the USSR. Yet as with all sources, there are some limitations that effect its reliability, due to the article being written in 1988, there can be no evaluation on the influence of later events such as the Solidarity Movement in Poland in 1989 to the collapse of the USSR. Lack of access to Soviet archives and information doesn't allow for the evaluation of the internal breakdown of the USSR during the 1980s. The purpose of the Source also has an impact on its values and limitations. Specifically, its values lie in it being an academic paper from a reputable source, therefore it should have factual accuracy. Yet this is contrasted by limitations inherent in this purpose. For example, as a conservative right wing Historian, Johnson's opinions are biased towards promoting Reagan and the USA as the primary influences in the breakdown of the USSR. Structured as an Article, this limits the source as the topic may have only been briefly researched, being only a small historical evaluation.

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Paul. "Europe and the Reagan Years." *Foreign Affairs*. N.p., 1998. Web.

## Section 2: The Investigation

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 transformed the political standing of the entire world. Seen as a victory for democracy, capitalism and freedom, the fall of the USSR led to questions on the successes of totalitarianism and the seemingly superiority of democracy. All theories lead to the same question, why did the USSR collapse? According to Revisionist Historians, it was Gorbachev's policies. However other historical schools of thought, such as Orthodox Historians, prefer to argue the importance of Reagan and the USA while Post Revisionists insist on the influence of economic and long-term factors. Through the evaluation of Revisionist, Orthodox and Post-Revisionist historical perspectives, this essay will explore the relevance and value of their opinion to the collapse of the USSR.

After decades of isolation, unavailable information on the USSR became more widespread, giving insight into the structure and society of the USSR. With this emerged a new political theory labelled, Post Revisionists. According to such historians, it was the erosion of the ideology and faith in the Communist socialist society which created a gradually decline in the strength of the Soviet Union. Joel Ostrow argues that it was exacted obedience and compliance that had held the Soviet Union together<sup>3</sup>. Stalin had controlled the country through mass political terror and with his death in 1953, the lack of the same control structure led to the gradual breakdown of control of the USSR. This can be emphasized through the growing rates of corruption while Brezhnev was in power, as without Stalin's political authority over the economy, it allowed for the dominance of the elite. Ostrow's viewpoint is valuable in exploring the long-term influences on the breakdown, however fails to acknowledge internal problems in Stalin's regime that had the same impact as his terror

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<sup>3</sup> Ostrow, Joel M. *Politics in Russia: A Reader*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2013. 117. Print.

campaign. As Dusko Doder commented, by the 1980s, Brezhnev's corrupt regime led to an "air of stagnation and cynicism which undermined the enterprise."<sup>4</sup> Whilst the source is clearly limited as it is a personal opinion from an American-run newspaper, Washington Post, as a reporter from Moscow it contains value as a primary source. While Doder highlights the failures of the Soviet government, aligning with American opinions, the source proves that long-term government corruption was a significant influence in the discontent of society in the USSR, leading to its downfall. The traditional promises of communism had failed to be followed through, leading to lack of support for the establishment. From these points of analysis, it is clear that Post-Revisionist Historians focus primarily on different long-term influences to account for Soviet decline. However, what they fail to acknowledge is that radical short-term events had an even greater casual role, acting as catalysts to the dissolution of the USSR, therefore requiring further analysis.

Post-Revisionists also speak of long-term nationalist movements that continuously threatened the USSR's stability. Vast fundamental cultural differences between the different ethnical nations in the USSR did not allow for a unified identity, undermining the theory of communism. A CIA Intelligence Assessment report in 1989<sup>5</sup> says that 'nationality problems have posed the most visible threat to the stability of the Soviet system'. This source is valuable as it emphasizes the internal social breakdown of the USSR instead of a calculated end. As Post-Revisionist Historians suggest, this unrest did not happen suddenly, but gradually increased after decades of suppressed nationalist movements such as Czechoslovakia in 1968, Hungary in 1956 and East Germany in 1953. The USSR's failure to act as one identity meant it would never be entirely stable and therefore vulnerable to

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<sup>4</sup> Dallin, Alexander, and Gail W. Lapidus. *The Uses of History: Understanding the Soviet Union and Russia*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009. Print.

<sup>5</sup> CIA Intelligence. "Soviet Society Under Gorbachev: Current Trends and the Prospects for Change." *Rising Political Instability Under Gorbachev: Understanding the Problem and Prospects for Resolution* (1987): n. pag. CIA Intelligence Archives. Web.

dissolution. As stated previously, whilst Post-Revisionists argue that nationalist movements were one of the main influences in the collapse, they do not evaluate that without the short-term events during the 1980s, the USSR could have recovered through strengthening the economy and appeasing minorities. Consequently, other perspectives need to be evaluated in order to improve the validity of the post-revisionist viewpoint.

While many historians believe Nationalist movements caused the disruption in the USSR, Revisionist Historians believe the policies of Gorbachev, in particular Glasnost, were the key factor in not only exacerbating the nationalist movements at the time but also the collapsing of political, social and economic barriers in the USSR. Herman and Lebow state that Gorbachev's role in the ending of the Cold War was intimately linked with that of the dismantling of Communist systems and, in particular, with the transformation of the Soviet political system.<sup>6</sup> Gorbachev's Glasnost policy allowed for public critique of the government, loosening the restriction on political action. The policy was desacralization and delegitimation of the authorities, exposing that the system had no ideology and purpose when not the only voice of reason. This was portrayed in the Pravda in 1986<sup>7</sup>, the major newspaper in the USSR, which stated its concerns on the Party directly deepening social inequality. This source highlights the lift on media censorship and displays the social discontent in the USSR. The discrediting of the system led to massive reconstruction of nationalist movements which caused instability in the Soviet regime. Glasnost encouraged dispute on ethnic identity, recovering ideas of national consciousness and identity. Using the evidence identified supported by the views of Revisionist Historians, Gorbachev's policy of Glasnost was extremely influential in causing the downfall of the USSR. Whilst long-term factors were clearly important in explaining Soviet decline, it required Glasnost to accelerate and enable

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<sup>6</sup> Herrmann, Richard K., and Richard Ned. Lebow. *Ending the Cold War: Interpretations, Causation, and the Study of International Relations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.

<sup>7</sup> *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XXXVIII, no. 6, March 12th, 1986

the reforms to function. Glasnost achieved this by exacerbating the current problems as well as allowing for delegitimization of the system in order to transform the Soviet system.

Whilst many historians focus on the internal breakdown of the USSR, Orthodox Historians would argue that US pressure caused the breakdown of the USSR. The Historian Richard Pipes, an previous advisor to Reagan stated ‘it is entirely possible for the US to influence by its actions’ also stated that the US ‘encouraged an internal implosion in the Soviet Union’.<sup>8</sup> This source is valuable to presenting the influence of America, however, the reliability of the source can be questioned due to its purpose. As an advisor to Reagan, Pipes arguments would align with the American government, creating a bias towards the USA’s influence. The source is limited in the fact it emphasises the strength of America instead of evaluating the internal weaknesses of the USSR. Reagan’s policies such as the support of Rebel movements, the Strategic Defense Initiative and the Star Wars programme destroyed the USSR’s economy and undermined political power the USSR. While it is clear to see that Reagan applied the pressure needed for the collapse of the Soviet Union, Orthodox Historians such as Richard Pipes fail to recognise that without the internal pressures in the USSR, Reagan’s highly dangerous foreign policy could have ended in global scale war instead of the breakdown of the USSR. This suggests that the Orthodox viewpoint is limited, as it stems from those who wish to see Reagan’s legacy boosted instead of exploring all factors involved. Through the emphasis of America’s role, Orthodox Historians disregard the willingness of the USSR for reform as well as the building social breakdown internally. Whilst American military force and pressure accelerated the economic problems in the USSR, it did not create the initial need for reform, therefore not the most important factor in the breakdown of the USSR.

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<sup>8</sup> Crockatt, Richard, and Nicola Parkin. *Fifty Years War: The United States and the Soviet Union in World Politics, 1941-1991*. N.p.: Routledge, 2002. Print

Both external and internal pressures led to the collapse of the USSR, and the interlinking factors led to a domino effect to the breakdown of the Soviet Government. While it is clear to see that long-term factors and American pressure would cause influential strain on the USSR, I would agree with Revisionist Historians that Gorbachev's policies were the catalyst for the dissolution of the USSR because it accelerated a long-term and current problems. As well as exacerbating all the original problems of the Soviet Union, Perestroika and Glasnost changed the social structure of the USSR allowing for its self-destruction. Without Gorbachev's strive for reform, the Soviet Union and the Cold War would not have ended as peacefully as it did.

### **Section 3: Reflection**

My investigation into the factors of dissolution of the USSR it allowed me to use a variety of methods to gain knowledge of the challenges that face Historians. Using secondary sources, I had to investigate the value of each source, especially the bias of the Historian. Through examination of different historical perspective, national bias and generational bias were extremely significant. This was exceedingly present in Orthodox Historical papers where Historians focused on USA's strengths due to their patriotic bias. Orthodox Historians also did not have as much information on the USSR, therefore based their opinion aligned with the US government. This have taught me that due to the bias nature of Historians, I always have to cross references sources in order to allow for balanced evidence.

However, primary sources are as much, or more valuable to a Historian than secondary sources. While they don't contain reasoned arguments like secondary sources, primary sources, such as the Pravda<sup>9</sup> excerpt, can highlight public opinions and concerns. However, with primary sources, it is extremely important to understand the context of the source. As the official USSR newspaper, the Pravda was subjected to heavy censorship, therefore revealed what the government wanted the people to think. Through this I have realised how important it is for students of History to understand the context of which the sources were written, therefore extremely necessary to consider both origins and purpose.

As well as differing views of opinions, there many different influences involved in the collapse of the Soviet Union. Prioritising factors to analysis in my investigation has revealed to me that historians have to make judgements on the relative importance of causes and factors. While all casual arguments are just interpretations of the past, these interpretations

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<sup>9</sup> Current Digest of the Soviet Press, vol. XXXVIII, no. 6, March 12th, 1986

are based on views, beliefs and biases of the Historian. Therefore, any causal argument is based on how a historian understands why changes occur in the world. This is seen through the emphasis of economic factors or social factors in different historical schools of thought. Therefore, to truly understand causation, students of History need to consider how historians think about historical change and why they prioritise events over the other.

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## **Appendix:**

Source A:

“In discussing social justice, one cannot close one’s eyes to the fact that Party, Soviet, trade union, economic, and even Young Communist League officials sometimes objectively deepen social inequality, taking advantage of all sorts of special refreshment bars, special stores, special hospitals, etc. Yes, there is socialism in our country, and everyone should receive according to his work. Let it be so, without wage-levelling.”<sup>10</sup>

Source B:

“Reagan’s armament program, accompanied as it was by a boom in the US economy, had a demoralising effect on the Soviet elite, who saw that the attempt to out-arm and out-perform the West was hopeless. A new way had to be found, and its direction lay in internal reform of a fundamental nature”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Current Digest of the Soviet Press, vol. XXXVIII, no. 6, March 12th, 1986

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, Paul. "Europe and the Reagan Years." Foreign Affairs. N.p., 1998. Web.