

Decline of Soviet Union: Causes and Consequences

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ABSTRACT

The Russian revolution divided the whole world in two blocs on the basis of ideology. The Marxist ideology was considered as emancipation for the deprived section of the society. This ideology was an outcome of exploitative character of capitalism. With the decline of Soviet Union, the social scientist of the entire world has started to question whether the decline of Soviet Union can be considered as end of ideology or this was failure of state administration in Soviet Union. In this research paper it has been tried to find out the reasons of this decline and to relate them with the main source of these reasons. The basic of Marxist philosophy is the end of the exploitation of man by man and that is possible only when resources will be owned by the society and its benefits will be distributed among the society but it did not happen in Soviet union, the resources were used to provide military as well as other assistance to other nations and the proletariat of Soviet Union were left miserable. Gorbachev initiated political and economic reforms which were fundamentally opposite to Marxist core and proved fatal for Soviet Union.

Key Words: Proletariat, Capitalism, Ideology, Communism, Glasnost.

The Russian Revolution is one of the great events of world's history. October revolution of 1917, which established first socialist state in the world, was rooted in Marxist-Leninist ideology, which was the most progressive ideology of its time. This ideology gave a new direction to the submerged strata of the entire world and it showed the way of abolishing exploitation of man by man. This ideology exposed the real character of the capitalist world. It conveyed a message of an exploitation free society to not only the Russian people but to the depressed classes of the entire world.

Man has been concerned with the role of ideas in shaping of human behavior ever since the first member of the species attempted to influence the behavior of another by exhortation instead of by blows.¹ The Marxist ideology is also not an exception to it. This ideology emerged as a reaction to the exploitative character of capitalism. At one time capitalism itself was a progressive ideology against feudal state. But today's progressive ideology became tomorrow's reactionary ideology and capitalism is clear manifestation of this idea. 16th century progressive capitalist ideology became the reactionary ideology of 19th and 20th century. Nature of capitalism has been clearly exposed in this century. During First World War the position of labour class had deteriorated so much so that it became intolerable for the poor masses to continue with it. To get rid of this gloomy situation there emerged the antithesis of capitalism in form of the idea of socialism, which was based on the egalitarian ideology and became the hope for downtrodden classes submerged strata to get rid of exploitation of capitalism.

The war had left throughout the Europe with a sense of disillusionment and despair which calls aloud for a new religion as the only force capable of giving men the energy to live vigorously. Bolshevism supplied this new religion. It promised an end to injustice of rich and poor, and end to economic slavery and an end of war. It promised an end of commercialism that subtle falsehood that leads men to appraise everything by its money value often merely by caprices of idle plutocrats. It promised a world where all men and women shall be kept safe by work, and where all work shall be value to the community and where all work shall be value to the community not only few wealthy vampires.² First blow to Tsarist regime came in form of 1905 revolution. In this revolution rulers tried to rule Russia on Western line but it was short lived. Lenin organized Communist Party in 1903 and overthrew the rulers of 1905 revolution. This was the last blow to Tsarist Russia and Lenin provided an alternative in form of a Socialist State. To implement Marxist ideology in real practice Lenin made a number of modifications in Marxist ideology. Reacting to the situation as they arose, Lenin continued to add new conceptions and to abandon or modify old

ones.³ From 1917 to 1985 there were many ups and downs in Soviet Union. It consolidated its economic, political and military power and attained big power status in the world and Soviet Union became a super power in the bipolar world and because of the consequences of Second World War many socialist states emerged in Eastern Europe. But after 1985 when Gorbachev came to power Soviet Union started to lose its dominant power, not only in international arena but also in domestic arena. For last seventy years, communism in Soviet Union was not only an ideology rooted in Marxism, it was at the same time an economic system, a social system and indeed a way of life for nearly 300 million people ruled by Kremlin. As an ideology it structured their thought process, as an economic system it organized their economic potential and as a social system and way of life it gave them little choice but to survive

through mastery of the technology of obedience and conformity.⁴ Vast socialist Soviet Union which was a super power of the world, disintegrated in 1991, major questions arise why such a vast socialist empire fell into pieces? What are the factors responsible for the breakdown of Soviet Union? The critical question is why the things came to a head only now? Was it a sudden down fall or was it a steady process? What was wrong, Communist ideology or the state system? What role the imperialist world played in the down of Soviet Union. Different views prevail regarding the decline which led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Some scholars have seen it in the content of history. Other in the light of decline of economy and ideology some other has blamed Gorbachev. Here an effort is made to analyze the different versions.

According to the some scholars the breakdown of Soviet Union is not a sudden incident but it is a steady process. The grievances of people accumulated for the last seventy years and when they could not be contained any longer they erupted and led to the breakdown of Soviet Union. Marx never gave the idea of party for the establishment of socialist state. It was purely an innovation of Lenin to overcome the practical realities of administration. This new concept of party led to establish democratic centralism which became responsible for the authoritarian dominance of Communist Party over the society. Real power was not vested in the workers but in the party. Till Lenin, some opposition was tolerated within the party during Stalin's regime this tolerance too disappeared. Even the party members had no right to dissent within the party. This factor accumulated the grievances not only among the party members but also among the people. From the very early period of group of Soviet leaders led by Trotsky opposed the totalitarian socialist state. They opposed the suppression of freedom and demanded the freedom of press.⁵

The war of succession which began after the death of Lenin also created discontentment among leaders and people. Trotsky was main opponent of Stalin and he was sent into exile. Stalin eliminated all types of opposition and established naked dictatorship of one man. Stalin's image was that of a ruthless dictator, inexorable liquidator of factions, classes and nations.⁶ Another crisis in Soviet Union came during the period of Khrushchev. After the death of Stalin he came into power and he reversed the policies of Stalin. He adopted a soft attitude towards western countries and started the liberalization process in Soviet Union. In domestic arena and in foreign policy context he relaxed the tight grip of dictatorship of proletariat. In 1955, Khrushchev publicly apologized in Belgrade for the Stalin's deeds.⁷ Khrushchev even tried to reverse the methodology of achieving socialism of violent revolution and dictatorship of proletariat. He believed that Communist parties in capitalist countries might come in power through parliamentary road and propagated and practiced the policy of peaceful co-existence.⁸ In this way Khrushchev turned the direction of socialist ideology which is based on violent revolution. After Khrushchev this strategy was adopted by Gorbachev after 1985 and within five years

the whole Soviet Union broke down. Gorbachev took more radical steps but in line of Khrushchev which proved suicidal to Soviet Union. Both the leaders adopted liberal approach and tried to govern Soviet Union on western democratic lines but both the leaders failed. Khrushchev could not succeed because he was frustrated by his own opponents in communist party but when Gorbachev had no opponent there was no Soviet Union to govern on democratic lines. So the first version of declining of Soviet Union is that too much liberal attitude of Soviet Leaders towards capitalist ideas in Soviet Union and Soviet leaders did not show any commitment for curbing capitalist feelings because they were not in favour of using force against capitalist propaganda which led to the disintegration of Soviet Union. But to some extent use of force is essential in socialist state to curb capitalism and capitalists. Capitalist forces in the entire world are so strong that they cannot be curbed without using some kind of force and socialist state is a transitory period from capitalism to communism and use of force is required to curb the capitalism and it leads to communism.

Socialist ideology itself is based on revolutionary ideas that if the working class does not suppress the capitalist class then capitalist class will suppress the working class. It is a matter of survival and there will be the dictatorship of minority instead of the dictatorship of majority. Example of Chile is clear manifestation of this idea. When Chile's communists came in power through parliamentary method, they were crushed by capitalists. Paris commune failed because of the lack of the use of force. So some kind of force is required to stabilize socialist state. Till 1985, there was united Soviet Union but where Gorbachev relaxed in matter of force than capitalist force got the opportunity and Soviet Union broke down into various republics.

Gorbachev started economic and political reforms in 1985 and he was very confident that these reforms would be milestone for new Soviet Union and it will progress very fast with these reforms but he could not foresee the consequences of these reforms. They themselves become the cause of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Instead of steady reforms Gorbachev took hasty steps, he wanted to change Soviet Society overnight, without preparing the proper ground for reforms. It was only the imposition of the reforms which led to the breakdown of Soviet Union itself. On the one side Gorbachev declared multi-party elections in Soviet Union but people were not aware about this type of polity and they were not trained for such type of system.

On the other hand, competitive market system on western line was adopted which was unknown to Soviet people but this was based on the feelings of nationalism which inculcated the nationalistic feelings among the people of various republics and there emerged chaos and in this chaos and complex situation leaders of these republics gave the slogan of nationalism instead of socialism and demanded that their independence should be recognized on nationalistic lines. In his early calculations Gorbachev simply overlooked this problem. Even when he released that nationalism was an important political force, he continued to underestimate its disruptive potential. Gorbachev

believed that economic recovery based on preserving the Soviet Union as an integrated economic unit would result in the loss of political legitimacy of the nationalist movement.⁹ After 1985, the issue of nationalism suddenly grew. Soviet Union was a vast country, including various nationalities. It is claimed by liberal leaders that Soviet Union suppressed the various nationalities and these nationalities rose as a protest against Soviet Federalism. Soviet Union was not based on the idea of nationalism but on the idea of socialism. The first commitment was socialism not nationalism. Predecessors of Gorbachev tried to assimilate the nationalities through the idea of socialism. But when Gorbachev abandoned the very notion of socialism then the problem of nationalism became prominent. Further problem of nationalities was inflamed by liberal leaders of Soviet Union and Western Countries. After 1985, ambitious republic leaders got the opportunity to protest against Soviet Union and demanded their independence.

Although Gorbachev had no intention of breaking Soviet Union and he resisted till the last minute to give independent status to republics but his own reforms forced Gorbachev to accept the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev had not assumed the leadership of the country for liquidation of the empire. In fact, he wanted to reform the empire into a modern, efficient and humane end. In other words, he wished to preside over a model empire, the envy of the other super power and other capitalist countries. He had entertained many excellent ideas but he lacked the wisdom to translate them into reality without disturbing his own empire.¹⁰ When Gorbachev accepted the disintegration of Soviet Union, the people, who still had some hope of United Soviet Union, were considered hardliners, tried to save Soviet Union by overthrowing Gorbachev on 19th August 1991. But till then the leaders of republics and Soviet liberal leaders, Boris Yeltsin consolidated their power and this last attempt to save Soviet Union proved futile. Entire capitalist world and the new leaders in Soviet Union considered this coup as the desperate attempt of hardliners of Glasnost and Perestroika and democratization but were consistently conspiring to dislodge him and other liberal leaders before they were finally crushed and dumped into dustbin.

Reforms are done to reform the system not to destroy it. Liberal leaders of Soviet Union and its republics took the help of these reforms in destroying Soviet Union. Lithuania was the first republic to declare its independence from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in March 1990. It was followed by other republics. Within one year, all the republics declared their independence with some variant. Final blow to united Soviet Union was given on 21st December 1991 when leaders of 11 republics – Azerbaijan, Armenia, Byelo Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the Ukraine and Uzbekistan signed in Alma-Atva and established commonwealth of independent states. The commonwealth of independent states is based on a number of political principles alien to former Soviet Union, including mutual respect for state sovereignty and self-determination, equality and

non-interference in internal affairs of other states and support for the development of democratic, law governed states.¹¹ Another view regarding the decline of the Soviet Union is that of the non-communists and western liberal thinkers who saw the downfall of Soviet Union as the problem rooted in socialist ideology itself. According to this idea, there is something wrong in communist ideology itself and it is victory of liberal and capitalistic ideology. According to this idea, there is something wrong in communist ideology itself. Downfall of Soviet Union is the downfall of communism itself and it is victory of liberal and capitalistic ideology. The dramatic changes in Soviet Union are generally viewed in context of the failure of communist system to fulfill the minimum expectations of Soviet people.¹² According to some thinkers Marxism is a utopia, it can only be studied as a theory but in practice it cannot be implemented. Idea of equalitarian society is myth and the days of communism are over with the dismantling of Soviet Union. They equate the communism with Soviet Union and people have discarded communist ideology. Inherent weakness in communist ideology is major cause of the downfall of Soviet Union. Next generations will not accept communist ideology because its true character has been exposed with the downfall of Soviet Union. The death of communism of Soviet Union compounds and complicates its survival elsewhere, as there is no centre or headquarters to consult or seek solace.¹³ Other scholars believe that even the idea of socialism and communism has faded with the developments in socialist countries. Socialism has suffered a defeat of immense proportions during last decade. For over seventy years the Russian Revolution and Soviet State and Society provided inspiration to millions all over the world struggling against all kinds of oppression and, then, suddenly the entire edifice of socialism seems to have collapsed.

Everywhere those committed to socialism are on defensive. So this idea propounds that it is not the failure of state system but it is the failure of ideology. But an ideology which is based on the idea of abolition of exploitation of man by man, how can it be demised when exploitation still exists. Socialist ideology will disappear when all form of exploitation disappears from the earth and an egalitarian society will be established, in which there will be no class. But all these elements still prevail in society, so how can the thinkers claim that communist ideology has failed. Ideology is not a state but it is an idea about a society. Secondly, it can be stated that collapse of Soviet Union does not mean that it is the victory of liberalism and capitalism. Capitalist ideology is in more danger because it is based on exploitation and it is reactionary and status quoists' ideology.¹⁴ Low and middle income Communist countries have scored over their capitalist counterparts in ensuring much more egalitarian distribution internally of income and wealth than their capitalist equivalents, and in providing much superior mass access to education and culture. In spite of evidence of fifty years of experience there are so many today who believe that capitalism if only it is allowed to operate properly is the surest route to

prosperity for all or most countries, then it means that the end of Stalinist self-delusion has assuredly not meant the end of Capitalist Self-delusion.¹⁵

It is a wrong perception that downfall of Soviet Union is the downfall of socialism and Communism. Now it is a proper time to understand socialism and communism with more depth because gap between rich and poor is growing widely day-by-day. Even Gorbachev who is responsible for decline of Soviet Union to some extent was not a critic of socialism. About Lenin Gorbachev wrote -Works of Lenin and its ideas of socialism remained for us an inexhaustible source of dialectical creative thought, theoretical wealth and political sagacity. His very image is an undying example of lofty moral strength, all loaned spiritual culture and selfless devotion to the cause of the people and socialism.¹⁶ In an interview of Gorbachev which was published in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* Gorbachev claimed that nobody has worked out any idea specifically for the destruction of socialism. As long as rational man exists, he will continue searching. At the same time, we are not going to idealize capitalist society.¹⁷ Another issue which is considered as the factor responsible for the decline of Soviet Union is the role of imperialist powers. Growing popularity of communism became a threat to western capitalist world. Socialist ideology was itself the product of inherent contradiction of capitalism became a threat to the survival of capitalism itself. USSR was like a shield against imperialist power for third world countries and could not be tolerated by imperialist powers, whose motive is to capture more and more markets and to gain and more profit by their exploitation. When the Capitalist countries saw that their interests were being harmed by U.S.S.R. then they started to fight collectively against communism and Communist countries. To contain the growing ideas of Communism they provided weapons and economic aid to non-Communist Countries and they instigated Soviet Liberal leaders to protest against socialist regime. Mismanagement of economy of Soviet Union was also the cause of Soviet's decline. Gorbachev after 1985 adopted the competitive market capitalists who could invest money. Therefore, black-marketing, hoarding, and large scale corruption among top class bureaucrats become common place as they wanted more and more money to build up capital for investing in the industries. This also created large scale unemployment and the younger strata of Soviet became discontented. There was huge fall in production, people started to hoard the essential goods which led to steep price rises. There was decline of consumer items such as radio, television, electronic bulbs etc. There was severe shortage of construction material causing chaos in housing sector and collapse of several state enterprises resulting from steep falls in capital investment. There was accelerating inflation with consumer prices increasing dramatically by 20 per cent in January, 27 per cent in February and 30 per cent in March. The cumulative impact of these economic trends was manifested by a sharp decline in Soviet foreign trade.¹⁸ Another reason for the decline of the economy was that the Socialist ideology is based on the notion of distribution of surplus value to

be working class and Marx said that surplus value will be extracted by the workers. In the Soviet Union this was not the case. Surplus value was extracted by the state not by the workers. This surplus value was not distributed among the workers, according to his work and according to his needs. This surplus value was used for making huge military preparations and for providing aids to other countries and workers who worked hard for their bright future were left miserable and it was the reason that resulted in the crisis in Soviet economy. Workers could not raise their living standard in comparison to western workers. So there was discontentment among the workers against Soviet regime. Socialist regime in U.S.S.R. did not follow the true principles of Marxism which led to the downfall of Soviet Union¹⁹.

In this way various trends can be seen while analyzing the factors responsible for the disintegration of Soviet Union and on the basis of these trends two ideas can be formulated. Firstly, idea is that there was mismanagement in Soviet Union and Soviet leaders did not follow true principles of socialism. Secondly there is inherent weakness in communist ideology and in Soviet Union people have rejected the idea of socialism if the first idea is followed then one can be optimistic about social and communism because true principles of socialism can be followed and mal-practices can be avoided and a true socialist state can be established. But if second idea is accepted then there is no hope for further establishment of socialist state or communism because when the ideology itself is wrong, then it cannot be implemented in practice.

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