

Paper 1



Free
Sample

History for the IB Diploma Programme



Political and Economic Transitions

 Pearson

SERIES EDITOR: EUNICE PRICE
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The Russian Federation
(1985–99)

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Key concepts:

- ▶ Cause and consequence
- ▶ Continuity and change
- ▶ Significance
- ▶ Perspectives

Introduction: The end of the USSR

Timeline of events 1985–99

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| March 1985 | Mikhail Gorbachev is appointed General Secretary, ushering in an era of reform and opening the path to significant changes within the Soviet Union. |
| April 1985 | Gorbachev launches policy of perestroika (restructuring), aiming to modernise Soviet society and economy. |
| 1986 | Gorbachev launches policy of glasnost (openness). |
| April 1986 | The catastrophic nuclear accident at Chernobyl exposes the Soviet government's secrecy and accelerates calls for reform. |
| March 1989 | First Congress of People's Deputies. Gorbachev establishes a new legislature, and the first partially open elections in Soviet history are held, increasing political pluralism. |
| November 1989 | The collapse of the Berlin Wall symbolises the weakening of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe, a process encouraged by Gorbachev's reforms. |
| June 1991 | Boris Yeltsin Elected President of Russia. |
| August 1991 | Hardline communists attempt a coup to halt Gorbachev's reforms. Yeltsin's resistance during the coup raises his profile as a defender of democracy. |
| December 1991 | The Soviet Union formally dissolves. Gorbachev resigns, and Yeltsin becomes the first President of the newly independent Russian Federation. |
| September 1993 | Yeltsin orders military action against the parliament building to suppress a political revolt, consolidating presidential power and leading to a new constitution. |
| December 1993 | Adoption of New Russian Constitution. |
| December 1994 | Yeltsin launches military operations in Chechnya, beginning a conflict that challenges Russia's territorial integrity and human rights record. |
| December 1999 | Boris Yeltsin unexpectedly resigns on New Year's Eve, appointing Vladimir Putin as acting president and marking the end of the Yeltsin era. |

In December 1991, Boris Yeltsin, President of the **Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR)** declared that 'the USSR, as a subject of political law and a geopolitical reality, has ceased to exist'. Only weeks later, the Soviet hammer and sickle flag lowered for the last time over the **Kremlin**, thereafter replaced by the tricolor flag of the Russian Federation. The sudden dissolution of the **Soviet Union**, once a **Cold War** superpower, was unforeseen by most nations. The **Russian Federation**, along with other former Soviet states, emerged as a **sovereign** nation, but the period from 1985 to 1999 saw significant upheaval as Russia transitioned from a **communist** state to a market-oriented **democracy**.

Source A:

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, an author and **dissident**, writing in his book *Rebuilding Russia* (1991).

'The problems that the Soviet leaders have to solve simply have no solutions . . . However, the Soviet leaders are not going to commit political suicide.'

Source B:

George F. Kennan, an American diplomat and historian, quoted in *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (1995), by Jack Matlock, former American ambassador.

'Reviewing the history of international relations in the modern era . . . I find it hard to think of any event more strange and startling, and at first glance more inexplicable, than the sudden and total disintegration and disappearance from the international scene . . . of the great power known successively as the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union.'

Source C:

Vladimir Bukovsky, a Soviet and Russian human rights activist and writer, quoted in 1989, in *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* (2001), by Stephen Kotkin, a historian.

'The future Russia will need democracy]. It will need it very much. But given our people's total lack of preparation for the intricacies of democratic life, democracy must be built from the bottom up, gradually, patiently, and in a way designed to last rather than being proclaimed thunderously from above in its fully-fledged form'.

Activity 1

ATL Research skills

1. Research the three authors of **Sources A, B, and C** and find out some information about who they were and the context in which they wrote these sources.
2. How are these sources useful for our understanding of different perspectives about the political and economic transition in the Russian Federation?
3. How does analyzing the context of a source help us better understand historical inquiries?

SKILLS

Using sources

A common misconception is that secondary sources are more reliable as they are written with hindsight and detached from the period being studied. Historical knowledge, however, is always impacted by the historian's values and the context in which it is created. Therefore, it is important to analyze the source's context to consider how it can be used to answer the inquiry question.

Multiple elements impact the context of the source. When analyzing the source, it is important to read the provenance to find the following information:

- The author – What expertise, knowledge or connection do they have to the events being studied? Would these influence their interpretation of the events being studied?
- When the source was published – Was something important happening at that time which related to the historical event being studied?
- Where the source was published – Does the place have a connection to the events being studied?
- The purpose of the source – Who is its intended audience? What are they meant to do with the information being presented? Would this source cause them to change their actions after receiving this information?

While we may not be able to identify every single element described above, we can use this information to develop an analysis.

Inquiry question: What caused the transition to take place?

The USSR was a heavily centralized political union and a Cold War superpower that few predicted was on the verge of collapse by 1989. The end of the Soviet Union directly resulted in the formation of the Russian Federation, but the causes of this end are not straightforward. While Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies (explored later) are generally identified as key reasons for the collapse, these attempts at reform did not occur in a vacuum. Causes of any historical event are always varied and involve underlying, long-term, and short-term factors.

Conceptual focus: Cause and consequence

In examining events of the past, historians attempt to uncover *causes* by examining the actions, beliefs, and circumstances that led to an event, including what roles people played in promoting, shaping, and resisting change. In this inquiry we will study the *causes* of the transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation. *Causes* must go beyond human motivations and also consider the larger context of the time. Did the Soviet Union end because of short-term policies? Or were there other underlying geopolitical and social conditions over a long-term period that were also significant? Later in this chapter, we will study the *consequences* of the transition.

Role of the Communist Party

On the eve of its 70th anniversary, the **Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU)** dissolved as dramatically as it had started in 1922. For decades, the CPSU (also referred to as the Party) had held political, economic, social, and ideological control of the Soviet Union. However, the CPSU's aging leaders, inability to reform, and internal divisions were all significant factors in the USSR's disintegration in 1991.

Gorbachev and the leadership of the CPSU

On 11 March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected as the eighth **General Secretary of the CPSU** by the **Politburo** after the death of Konstantin Chernenko. Gorbachev believed reforms were needed to improve social conditions and strengthen the CPSU. To do so, he made significant personnel changes within the Party and government immediately after his election. Within the first year of Gorbachev's leadership, 70 percent of ministers were replaced, along with 50 percent of leadership **cadres** in the Soviet republics. By the end of 1986, 40 percent of all **First Secretaries** were fired, and within the **Central Committee** itself, 60 percent of members were replaced. Furthermore, obvious rivals to Gorbachev in the Politburo were removed or retired. Gorbachev did his best to fill the senior leadership and Politburo with reformers, including Boris Yeltsin, but between 1985–89, his reform attempts were hampered by the CPSU's political infighting and declining legitimacy.



Figure 2.1 Politburo members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1980s). Gorbachev is in the front row, far right.

Gorbachev's first real opportunity to signal his departure from the traditional Soviet past came at the 27th Congress of the Communist Party during February and March of 1986. Gorbachev delivered a four-hour speech in which he dismissed the economic stagnation of previous years and pushed his desire to introduce a **democratization** of Soviet society as well as fundamental changes to the economy.

Party divisions

Gorbachev's time in office was plagued by bitter divisions within the CPSU, which hampered his attempts at effective reform and were an underlying cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Divisions within the party were largely between the **reformists** (those aligned with Gorbachev's desire for reform) and the **traditionalists**, also known as **Communist hardliners**. Early in his leadership, Gorbachev began advocating for a multiparty political system, to democratize the political system; many of Gorbachev's supporters urged him to split the Party between the reformists and traditionalists to achieve this. However, Gorbachev feared the bitter struggle that would follow, knowing that a potential loss of control over the armed forces and the CPSU political machine could lead to civil war. Despite increasing backing from his loyal supporters and growing momentum for his reformist agenda, in November 1987, Gorbachev committed his first real political mistake by suddenly removing Yeltsin from his position as First Secretary of the Moscow Communist Party, due to 'major shortcomings in his leadership,' replacing him with Lev Zaikov. While Gorbachev had appointed Yeltsin to the Politburo early in his leadership, as an ally of reform, Yeltsin's declaration to resign from the Politburo, coupled with his emerging popularity, led some to believe he had become a threat to Gorbachev's leadership and reform program. Yeltsin's removal from the leadership team further divided party leaders; hardliners saw it as a critique of Gorbachev's policies, whereas reformists justified it on the grounds of Yeltsin's instability. In any case, the move had little short-term gain and irreparably damaged any allegiance Yeltsin had to Gorbachev; this would prove to be decisive in the turmoil of 1991. In the first few years of his leadership, deep party divisions meant Gorbachev learned to lower his expectations around the pace of reform, and he adopted a more central position between the reformists and the hardliners.

Democratization

Gorbachev's early reform agenda saw the beginning of a process of democratization of the Soviet political system. Gorbachev firmly believed that opening political discussion and debate would encourage more public participation in elections, thus encouraging more trust in the regime and enhancing the legitimacy of government. At the 19th Party Conference in June 1988, he created the new legislative body, the **Congress of People's Deputies** and forced the introduction of contested elections for two-thirds of the seats. While this was not yet a multi-party democracy – indeed, 87 percent of the elected deputies were Communists – voters could force out Party leaders if they so desired. This was the fate of nearly 40 First Secretaries, most notably the then Prime Ministers of Latvia and Lithuania, in the Congress elections in early 1989.

Glasnost

Gorbachev's most significant reform, glasnost, was intended to encourage economic reform through a renewed transparency of the government, achieved by open public discourse on social, political, and economic issues. Under Soviet central control, many topics had long been dangerous to discuss for fear of retaliatory measures by the **KGB** or police. Glasnost then, was about inviting Soviet people, and the media, to openly discuss topics and ideas around the economy, societal problems, and criticism of the government, including Gorbachev. This was not just encouraged among ordinary citizens, but also within the government itself, where ministerial debate quickly became more open and critical. Gorbachev often found it difficult to mask his displeasure at this open criticism of policy (often televised), such as his economic reforms, or on topics such as the ongoing Soviet war in Afghanistan (see Info box). However, Gorbachev saw this increased transparency across all facets of society as a necessary first step in reforming the Soviet state.

Source D:

Figure 2.2 The front cover of Soviet satirical magazine *Crocodile*, by cartoonist V. Shkarban, published in 1987. The caption at the bottom says: 'And we are keeping up with the times - developing glasnost!' The Russian words on the signs in the image say (from left to right): Mistakes, defects, our disadvantages, laggards (those lagging behind).



Exam practice

Inquiry question: To what extent did glasnost play a role in causing the transition to a Russian Federation?

Explain how the content of **Source D** can be used to answer the inquiry question.

Gorbachev's team underestimated the effects of glasnost, with writers, cultural figures, and media personalities embracing the new creative freedom it gave them. Some historians argue that the Soviet leader had introduced the policy partly to bring transparency to the government, but also to undermine conservative opposition to his reforms within the Communist Party. Indeed, after glasnost failed its first test in April 1986 with the Party's response to the Chernobyl disaster (see page XX), Gorbachev renewed his commitment to the reform by appointing pro-reformist editors to prominent newspapers, magazines, and literary journals. Historian Archie Brown refers to this as 'guided glasnost', a term coined to explain the government's belief that they could control this new policy of openness for their own benefit.

However, by relaxing censorship, the Party lost control of the mass media, with journalists unleashing years of frustration by freely writing about social issues that had been concealed by the government for decades. Environmental problems, human and natural disasters, and social problems, such as high rates of infant mortality, the decreasing birthrate, and the spread of HIV, became topics for open public discourse. Journalists became public heroes; the more daring their exposés, the more their publications soared. This meant the media began filling in the blank spots of Soviet history, much to the dismay of some in the party leadership. Gorbachev believed this re-analysis of the past was necessary. However, as the country's previously unspoken violent history began to be aired – particularly the events that took place under the **totalitarian** reign of **Joseph Stalin**, such as mass terror, famine, and death – the Soviet regime's credibility crumbled. Furthermore, the Soviet narrative that had been used for decades, that of communism's superiority over capitalism, was picked apart by writers, as people began turning away from the government and toward the media for their truth. While **de-Stalinization** was widely welcomed both domestically and internationally, on a symbolic level it undermined the basic tenets of the Soviet state, without offering a replacement.

Impact of glasnost on the CPSU

While the Congress of People's Deputies did encourage more openness, this only led to more criticism of the Party. The Congress became a democratic platform and lobbied against the one-party state. Reformists began to flourish not only in society, but within the Party itself. The main demand of the reformists was the removal of Article 6 from the 1977 Stalin Constitution (see Source E) and Gorbachev pushed this proposal through the Politburo in February 1990. 'In place of the Stalinist model of **socialism**,' he said in a televised address on 2 July, 'we are coming to a citizens' society of free people. The political system is being transformed radically, genuine democracy with free elections, the existence of many parties and human rights is becoming established and real people's power is being revived'.

Yet, as the reformists grew within the CPSU, the Party became deeply divided between the Communist hardliners – those who wanted to defend the legacies of the



The Soviet–Afghan War took place in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. The Soviet Union and the Afghan military fought against the rebelling Afghan mujahideen (Islamist militant groups). Up to 3 million Afghans were killed, with millions more fleeing from the country as refugees. The conflict is often cited as a key factor in the demise of the Soviet Union.

Bolshevik revolution (and presumably their own power and status) – and **social democrats** such as Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin who were ready to move away from the old Communist ways, symbolized by the aging Party members. Glasnost, thus, played a key role in reshaping the fundamental place of the CPSU in the Soviet Union. Before the transparency that glasnost brought, there was no accountability for the government to respond effectively to growing problems as no criticism of the Party was allowed. This meant the Soviet government did not fully understand the severity of its problems, and it became inefficient as a result. The Chernobyl disaster of 1986 is an example of this.



Chernobyl Disaster

On 26 April 1986, the No. 4 reactor of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukrainian SSR exploded after a planned safety test went wrong. Local residents were not alerted to the explosion and the nearby city of Pripyat was not immediately evacuated. As the reactor was run by Moscow authorities, even the Ukrainian government did not receive timely notification about the accident. Nor did Gorbachev. Investigators arrived the following evening and quickly learned that high levels of radiation had been released – already resulting in several deaths and hospitalizations – and they ordered the evacuation of Pripyat. Within 10 days, the evacuation area had expanded from 6 miles to 19 miles (10 km to 30 km).

Soviet citizens adopted the term ‘radiophobia’ to describe the impact the Chernobyl disaster continued to have on their health, yet doctors were not permitted to test for radiation exposure. Significantly high numbers of children were diagnosed with thyroid cancer, and women were discouraged from having children. Abnormal livestock births were frequent, and many animals had to be killed as a result. Soviet authorities blamed the plant management for safety violations and conducted a show trial in which they were sentenced. However, subsequent tests concluded that it was the faulty design of the reactors that was to blame.

The impact of the Chernobyl accident was monumental in the resentment it created toward the CPSU and its centralized-planning of the Soviet state, particularly in the most-affected republics of Belarus and Ukraine. It is estimated that 8.4 million people in the Soviet Union were exposed to Chernobyl radiation and that 200,000 people died as a result of the explosion. The official government death toll stands at 31. The Soviet authorities’ decisions went against the spirit of openness that glasnost promoted. Credibility of the centralized Moscow authorities dramatically fell and never recovered.



Figure 2.3 This image, taken by Sergei Supinsky on 26 April 2017, shows women widowed by the Chernobyl disaster taking part in the ‘The Heroes Alley’ march in memory of the victims.

Glasnost forced the CPSU to re-evaluate many aspects of its decade-long control over the Soviet Union. This led to a crisis of confidence for many in the Party, particularly the communist bureaucratic elite, who felt threatened by an increasingly pro-Western and liberal leadership.

The demise of the CPSU

Despite Gorbachev’s reform attempts, the CPSU could not adapt to changing social and political needs, and was divided by internal conflict, which caused a great loss of credibility among its people. As a result, it could not protect the Union from internal and external crises, such as the exodus of republics that occurred in late-1990 and into 1991, and the Communist hardline **coup** in August 1991 (see pages XX), which coup was the defining event that brought the CPSU to an end after seven decades of unchallenged centralized power. Signs of a party in decline had been visible before 1989, largely as a consequence of its long resistance to reform. However, when the Soviet constitution was amended in 1990 to reflect the formal detachment of the CPSU from Soviet governance (Sources E and F), it formalized a loss of relevance and power for the Party. Thus, the CPSU, which cultivated and sustained the Soviet Union for so long also caused its demise, by resisting necessary reforms for too long and then carrying them out badly when they finally came.

Source E:

Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution 1977, before the 1990 amendments, with a record available by the Marxist Internet Archive.

‘The leading and guiding force of the Soviet society and the nucleus of its political system, of all state organisations and public organisations, is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The CPSU exists for the people and serves the people.’

The Communist Party, armed with **Marxism–Leninism**, determines the general perspectives of the development of society and the course of the home and foreign policy of the USSR, directs the great constructive work of the Soviet people, and imparts a planned, systematic and theoretically substantiated character to their struggle for the victory of communism.’

Source F:

Article 6 of the Soviet constitution, as amended on 15 March 1990, with a record available by the Constitution of the Russian Federation.

‘The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, other political parties as well as trade union, youth and other public organisations and mass movements, through their representatives elected to the Councils of People’s Deputies and in other forms, participate in the policy-making of the Soviet state, in the management of state and public affairs.’



Checkpoint

1. With reference to specific content, compare the role of the CPSU as outlined in the two versions of Article 6 of the Soviet Union Constitutions found in **Sources E and F**.
2. What might the political impact of the 1990 amendments have been for the CPSU?

Impact of stagnation and failed economic reform

When Gorbachev took office in 1985, he inherited an economy almost at a standstill. Years of Cold War rivalry with the United States, internal corruption, poor harvests, redundant industrial machinery, along with the sheer financial weight of sustaining an

active presence across 15 republics, had led to a **shell economy**. By the 1980s, Soviet citizens' daily existence was hampered by the impacts of economic stagnation, such as poor living standards, chronic food shortages, and low wages. Some historians argue that Gorbachev considered the economy to be the most critical factor during his administration, sacrificing any sort of foreign policy ambitions so that he could give it his undivided attention.

Source G:

Mikhail Gorbachev, Soviet leader, describing the economic problems in the Soviet Union, in his book titled *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (1987).

'In the last fifteen years the national income growth rates had declined by more than a half and by the beginning of the eighties had fallen to a level close to economic stagnation. A country that was once quickly closing on the world's advanced nations began to lose one position after another. Moreover, the gap in the efficiency of production, quality of products, scientific and technological development, the production of advanced technology and the use of advanced techniques began to widen, and not to our advantage.

...for all 'gross output' there was a shortage of goods. We spent, in fact we are still spending, far more on raw materials, energy and other resources per unit of output than other developed nations. Our country's wealth in terms of natural and manpower resources has spoilt, one may even say corrupted, us. That, in fact, is chiefly the reason why it was possible for our economy to develop extensively for decades.'



Checkpoint

What reasons does Gorbachev give for economic stagnation in the Soviet Union in **Source G**?

Gorbachev could see that much of the economic stagnation the Soviet Union was experiencing was a result of the CPSU's centralized power over decades. However, despite his best intentions, Gorbachev's lack of real economic expertise meant he was dealing with reform ideas he knew very little about. From as early as 1985, Gorbachev visited factories across the Union, in places such as Ukraine and Siberia, to better understand the declining industrial and agricultural output.

Economic reforms under Gorbachev

By the mid-1980s, the centralized Soviet economy had largely delivered – on paper at least – full employment, subsidized (partly government-funded) groceries, and cheap housing, fuel, and transport. However, these principles of socialist ideology hid fundamental economic problems, such as low productivity and a poor standard of living. Gorbachev's report to the CPSU Central Committee on accelerating scientific and technological progress in June 1985 revealed his beliefs that the USSR had a stagnant economy and inadequate living standards, and he stated that the Soviet economy should be reshaped 'without delay'. Some of Gorbachev's reformist allies even went further to say that the Soviet economy was close to breaking down entirely. Through glasnost, experts and citizens were able to openly discuss the economic issues that were facing the Soviet economy, such as inefficiencies, corruption, military overspending, and agricultural failures. This made future political and economic reform possible in a way it had not been before. Gorbachev's first key economic policy was perestroika, a liberal