The Impact of the Collapse of the USSR

What caused the collapse of the USSR?

The USSR experienced dramatic changes following 1985. Gorbachev came to power, and his leadership was different to that of previous leaders: he was much younger and more prepared to change. The reforms he introduced had unintended effects:

- Uprisings began in the Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe
- The Cold War came to an end
- The USSR collapsed

The USSR in 1985:

In 1985, the USSR was in a state of crisis. This was a result of a number of factors, namely:

- An on-going war in Afghanistan
  - The USSR had intervened to support the pro-communist government against a group of Islamist rebels called the Mujaheddin
  - The war, sometimes referred to as the “Soviet Vietnam”, was a major drain on Soviet resources and manpower
- The Cold War arms race
  - Was extremely expensive to keep up with USA
- Relations with the West were strained
  - The détente (period of relaxed relations) of the 1970s had ended
- Their economy was on the brink of collapse
  - Production had declined, e.g. agricultural, industrial
    - Money was spent on arms race and Afghanistan
    - Communist system meant there was no incentive for farmers to work hard
  - Shortages of consumer goods were widespread
- Inadequate standard of living
  - Housing, healthcare, etc
    - Money spent on arms race and Afghanistan
- Loss of faith in the government
  - It appeared unable to solve problems

Gorbachev and his Reforms:

In 1985, Gorbachev became the leader of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union. It was his goal to reform the communist system, but not abandon it or dismantle the USSR. However, the West misinterpreted his reforms, believing that he had given up on Communism and, ultimately, the Soviet Union collapsed anyway. This was despite Gorbachev’s intention that the Communist Party could control the changes while remaining Communist.
**Perestroika**: restructuring the economy (economic reform)

- Gorbachev wanted to move away from a state-controlled, centrally-planned economy to a free-market economy, driven by supply and demand
  - Buying/selling at a profit
  - Incentive to work
- Businesses were allowed to make their own decisions on prices, production and marketing
- State subsidy of goods and services ended
- Welcomed foreign investment

**Glasnost**: a policy of ‘openness’ (political reform)

- Freedom of speech was allowed
  - Media was free to draw attention to problems
- Criticism of government was encouraged
- Old versions of history were challenged
  - Actions, especially those of Stalin, were questioned
- Free elections for parliament
  - First free elections in Soviet History (had not happened since 1916)
- Opposition parties were allowed to operate

These last two political changes were extremely radical.

**Impact of Gorbachev’s Reforms:***

The moderate economic reforms introduced by Gorbachev ended up going further than intended; the Communist Party lost control of the changes, and the policy of glasnost led to widespread public criticism and hostility as the problems with perestroika were openly discussed. Ultimately, this caused Gorbachev’s downfall.

**Perestroika** was not successful. It had aimed to increase the levels of economic development and raise living conditions: neither of these two aims was met

- Without State control:
  - Systems collapsed
  - Prices increased
  - Low production rates and shortages continued
  - Inflation and shortages
  - Living conditions for ordinary citizens worsened
    - Costs of medical care, food and housing increased
- Gorbachev lost support
  - Blamed for problems and openly criticised
  - Caught between demands of conservatives (who wanted to return to the old ways) and radical reformers (who wanted more change)
    - Some criticises reforms as betrayal of communism
Others, such as Yeltsin, called for more radical reforms like full democracy
- Boris Yeltsin was a politician
  - Capitalised on Gorbachev’s mistakes
  - Criticised Communist Party for corruption
  - Became a public hero

**Impact of the war in Afghanistan:**

The Soviet Army had been involved in the war in Afghanistan since 1979, where they supported the pro-Communist government against Mujaheddin resistance fighters, fearing that the rise of Islamist militancy would inspire large Muslim population in southern USSR to rise up. The Mujaheddin were a militant Islamist group, backed by the USA for being anti-Communist and Pakistan for being pro-Islamist.

The USSR was unable to win the war
- It was a heavy drain on resources and lives
  - By 1985: 200 000 Soviet soldiers had died
- It was becoming unpopular in USSR
  - Could now be criticised publicly
- In 1989, Gorbachev withdrew all Soviet troops from Afghanistan
  - Roughly same length of involvement as USA in Vietnam
  - Afghanistan often referred to as the Soviet Union’s Vietnam

**Impact of events in Eastern Europe:**

By 1989, Gorbachev’s reforms had inspired popular protests across Eastern Europe. Gorbachev sent a message to the governments of these satellite states, telling them that they could not depend on the Soviet army to keep them in power as had been the case in the past. As a result, the Communist governments were overthrown and different nationalities within the USSR demanded freedom, especially in the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

**The role of nationalism:**

The USSR consisted of 15 separate republics, the largest of which was the Russian Republic. The Russian population made up about 50% of the Soviet population, and was culturally dominant. This, combined with the fact that most positions of power were held by Russians, led to resentment among people of other republics
- Independence demanded, especially in Baltics States
- Gorbachev used Soviet Army to crush nationalist uprisings in Georgia and the Baltic States
  - Opposite of what he did in Eastern Europe
  - Did not want the USSR to disintegrate
The effects of the coup against Gorbachev:

By 1991, Gorbachev had become increasingly unpopular and, though he was still the leader of the USSR, no longer had much real control. There was growing support for Yeltsin, who was now President of the Russian Republic and believed that the USSR should be dissolved.

In August of 1991, conservative politicians and army officers staged a coup against Gorbachev, arresting him whilst he was on holiday in the Crimea. The coup, however, failed when Yeltsin appealed to the soldiers to oppose their commanding officers.

Though this meant that Gorbachev remained in power, it weakened his position even further. He owed his continued position to Yeltsin, and his weakness gave hope to the Baltic republics and they declared their independence. This meant that, despite Gorbachev’s intentions, the USSR had begun to fall apart.

In December of the same year, the USSR dissolved completely and was replaced by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Gorbachev resigned.

Reasons for collapse of USSR:

- People were no longer willing to accept the harsh Soviet dictatorship
- The growth of nationalism, combined with the wide range of nationalities within the USSR, undermined the unity of the Soviet Union
- People were dissatisfied with the results of Gorbachev’s reforms and wanted more fundamental changes
- The strength of ‘people power’ or popular protest
How did the collapse of the USSR change the balance of world power?

The end of the Cold War:

The economic problems suffered by the Soviet Union played a major role in their adjusting their policies:

- Needed to reduce military spending
- Meetings took place between Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan (President of USA)
  - At Geneva and Reykjavik
  - Discussed an end to the arms race
- Agreed to end the nuclear arms race
  - Signed two treaties
    - 1987, Washington
    - 1988, Moscow

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 led to better relations between the superpowers and, in December of that year, Gorbachev and President Bush Senior agreed that the Cold War was over at a meeting on a warship off the coast of Malta.

The effects of the collapse of the USSR on Russia:

In 1991, most of the republics that had made up the USSR formed in CIS. The Baltic States, however, chose total independence. Of the states that made up the CIS, the Russian Federation was the largest and it had many problems facing it:

- Economic problems continued under Yeltsin (1990 – 1999)
  - Low production, unemployment, inflation, collapse of wages
  - Introduced reforms such as privatisation (selling of government services to individuals), which were unsuccessful and led to a large gap between rich and poor
- High levels of corruption and crime became prevalent
  - Emergence of the Russian Mafia
- People missed aspects of the controlled economy:
  - No longer had state-funded healthcare, assured employment, controlled prices/wages
  - Had wanted freedom but not expected problems of capitalism
- Uprising in Chechnya (small republic with a mainly Muslim population)
  - Brutally suppressed – sparked greater resistance
  - Yeltsin feared it would influence other Muslim populations
Effects of collapse of USSR on world communism:

Communism had collapsed in the USSR and Eastern Europe, but had not suffered a complete global collapse. China, Cuba, Vietnam and North Korea remained communist states.

In the 1980s, economic reforms similar to perestroika were introduced in China. This resulted in an economic boom, and worked because the Communist Party maintained strict control and did not introduce a policy of openness. This meant that China replaced the USSR as the dominant communist power in the world.

Cuba, Vietnam and North Korea, however, were all affected by their loss of Soviet support:

- Cuba remains communist and suffered economic problems
- Vietnam calls itself communist but is becoming capitalist and profits from war tourism
- North Korea remains strictly communist and isolated and is of great international concern

Effects of collapse of USSR on the power of the USA:

The collapse of the USSR meant that the United States was in the dominant position as the only superpower and because it no longer needed to worry about Soviet reactions to their foreign policies. For example:

- US-led invasion of Kuwait during the Gulf War in 1991
  - Iraq had invaded Kuwait and US led invasion to liberate Kuwait
  - US could throw its weight around without worrying about consequences (and still does)

The West treated the collapse of the USSR as a victory:

- The triumph of capitalism over communism
- The triumph of democracy over totalitarianism
- The US was now in the dominant position ideologically, economically and militarily
- NATO was expanded to include many former Warsaw Pact countries after Warsaw Pact collapsed
- American-style capitalism became the dominant feature of the global economy

However, the US had domestic problems:

- The economic position of African Americans meant that inequality was still a source of tension
- Rising unemployment figures, the banking crisis and economic recession showed flaws in capitalist system
- There was a growing divide between rich and poor
No rival to US domination:

- The CIS was ineffectual – Russia was weakened by her internal problems
- Britain and France never fully recovered after World War Two
  - Lost colonial empires
  - Economic problems
- Severe problems in reunified Germany
  - Economically, East Germany was far behind West Germany, who then had to support the east
  - Rise of Neo-Nazism, racism and xenophobia, often directed against Turks
- European Union (EU) included most countries in West and Eastern Europe:
  - Formed in 1993
  - Common citizenship, currency
    - Allowed for free movement of goods and people
    - However, created tensions within EU
  - Weakened by difference in national interests and conflict in Yugoslavia
    - Yugoslavia broke into separate states
    - Accompanied by ‘ethnic cleansing’, genocide and violent civil war
  - EU was potential economic force, but suffered from (and continues to suffer from) severe economic problems
- China was now the main communist power in the world
  - Had successfully liberalised the economy in the 1980s
    - Reduced government control and allowed some capitalist policies
  - Maintained strict control – crushed Tiananmen Square protests in 1989
  - The 1990s brought massive economic growth in China
    - Booming economy
    - Rival to US economic domination

Use of power by the US after the Cold War:

Today, some criticise American foreign policy in the Middle East as being too involved:

- Intervention in other countries
    - Afghanistan: “War on Terror”; overthrown Taliban
    - Iraq: search for Weapons of Mass Destruction; overthrown Saddam Hussein
- Sanctions against Libya (for Lockerbie Bombing) and Iraq (before invasion)
- Continuing support for Israel in on-going conflict with Palestinians

There is growing anti-American feeling in many Arab states due to America interfering where it had no right to do so.
Others criticised the US for failing to become involved in other areas:

- US reduced support and financial contributions to UN
- US refused to support UN intervention in Rwanda and Burundi to prevent civil war and genocide
- US reluctant to support NATO intervention in Bosnia

The ‘New World Order’:

After the end of the Cold War, the world was in a state of complication and unpredictability – it was no longer a ‘bipolar world.’ There were many civil and regional wars, and the threat of nuclear was had not disappeared – any countries still possessed nuclear weapons (Israel, Iran, North Korea) and there are fears that they may be used in regional conflicts, such as the India-Pakistan conflict.

The world was not more united, but only more uncertain. The division between East and West had been replaced by a division between the North (developed countries) and the South (developing countries)