

1991

The Fall of the Soviet Union

When America's Cold War adversary collapsed 20 years ago, it freed millions from oppression and left the U.S. as the world's only superpower

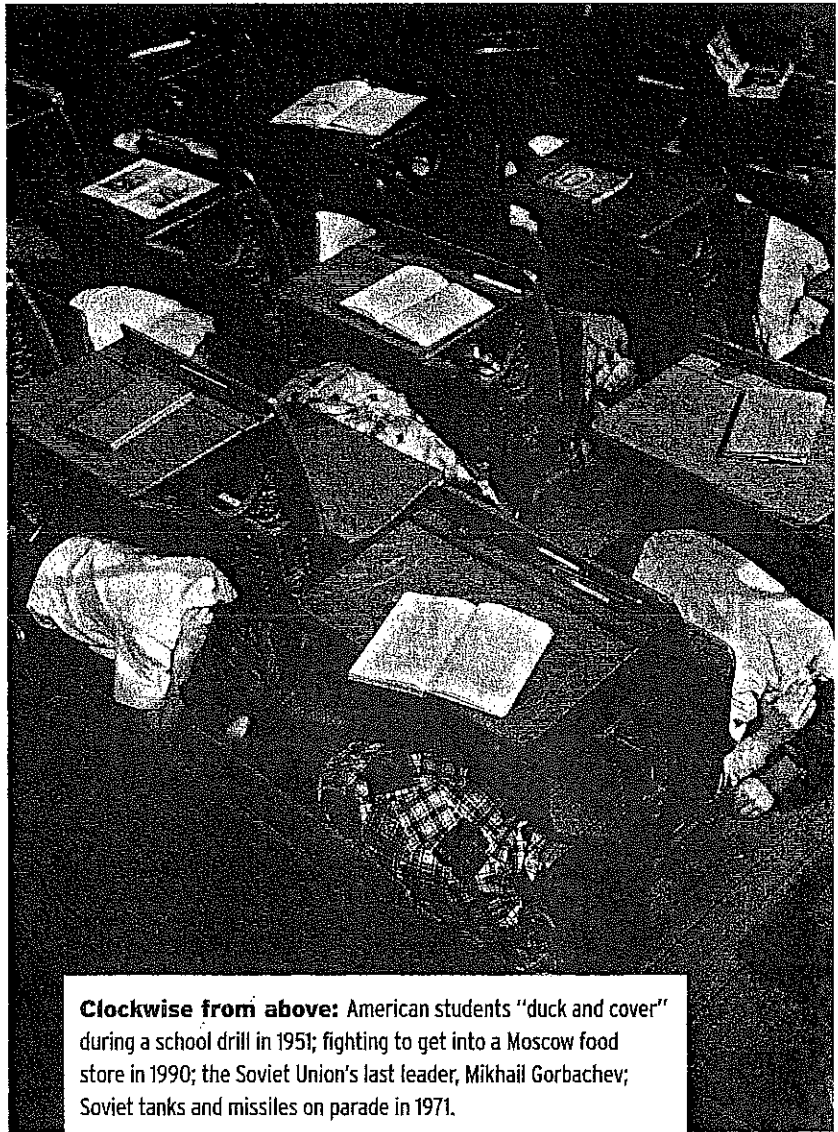
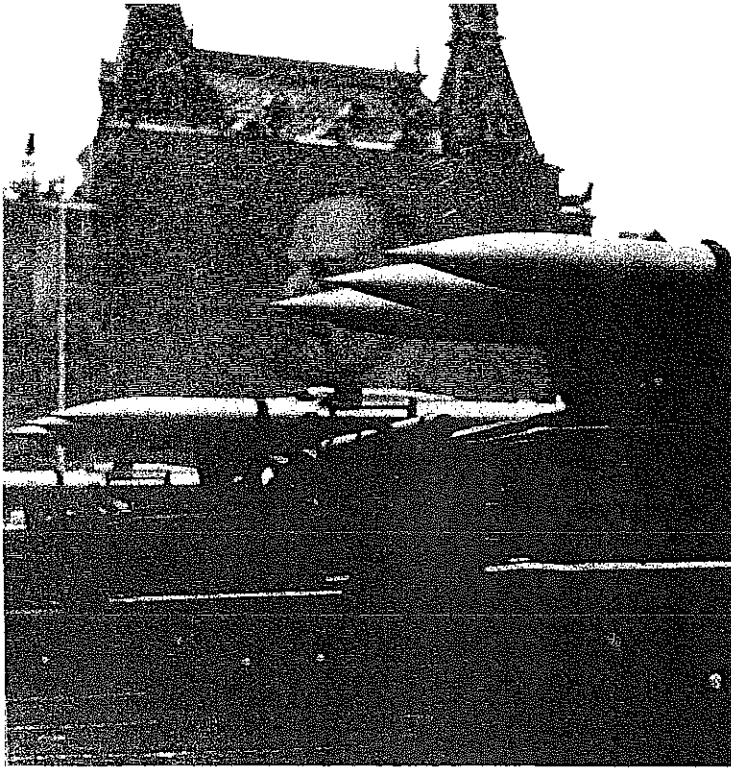
BY MICHAEL WINES



The Soviet Union was a colossus that covered one sixth of the Earth's land and held sway over even more. It kept a third of Europe captive, and blocked escape with troops, tanks, and concrete walls. In its Cold War battle with the U.S. starting in 1945, it edged the world so close to destruction that cities across America built bomb shelters and schools taught nuclear-blast survival alongside algebra and history.

Then, on Christmas Day 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.)—15 states lashed together for almost 75 years into one of history's grandest and most fearsome empires—dissolved, the victim of a dying economy and its own citizens' thirst for freedom.

The end came peacefully and with stark simplicity: "I hereby discontinue my activities at the post of president," its leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, declared. "We're now living in a new world."



Clockwise from above: American students “duck and cover” during a school drill in 1951; fighting to get into a Moscow food store in 1990; the Soviet Union’s last leader, Mikhail Gorbachev; Soviet tanks and missiles on parade in 1971.

And a jubilant one—at least initially.

“You waved goodbye to everything you had been born with,” recalls Dmitri Trenin, a Moscow scholar. “Everything around you—in political, social, and economic terms—was collapsing. And there was a promise of something new and better emerging.”

The fall of the Soviet Union ended a 46-year struggle between two superpowers that threatened to destroy not only themselves, but also the rest of humanity through nuclear war.

“I would call it, after World War II, the most significant event of the 20th century,” says Paul Hughes at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington. “It allowed millions of people to stop living in fear.”

Soviet dictatorship started idealistically, with the theory that everyone should share society’s wealth. Communism, its founding ideology, argues that privately owned businesses and industries should be confiscated and collectively owned

by the state for everyone’s benefit.

In 1917, Vladimir Lenin led the Russian Revolution, which toppled Tsar Nicholas II after World War I left the nation sapped and near starvation. Lenin and his brutal successor, Joseph Stalin, remade the vast, mostly illiterate nation into an industrial giant, but at a staggering cost: At least 40 million people died from famine, persecution, and mass executions under Stalin.

“Not since the days of Peter the Great, who sought to westernize Russia by force, had the country witnessed so violent a transformation,” *The New York Times* wrote about Stalin.

The Iron Curtain

During World War II, the Soviet Union repelled Hitler’s army. After the war, it installed puppet governments in Eastern European nations captured from Germany, leading former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to say that

an “iron curtain” had descended across Europe. Soviet leaders declared themselves devoted to the West’s destruction.

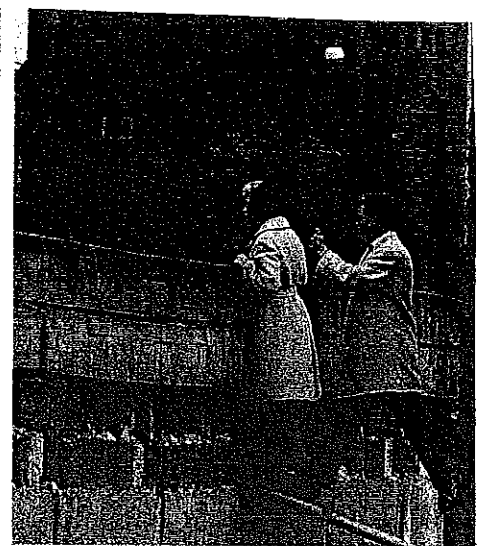
Thus began the Cold War—a standoff between Communism and capitalist Western nations led by the U.S.—that threatened global annihilation (see *timeline*, p. 20).

After the Soviet Union exploded an atomic bomb in 1949, the two sides began a frantic arms race, eventually building 70,000 nuclear bombs. American schools taught students to “duck and cover” under their desks if they saw a nuclear bomb’s bright flash—and issued dog tags so their bodies could be identified.

“There was a real risk of things getting out of control and real miscalculations being made,” says Fiona Hill, a Russia scholar at the Brookings

Michael Wines, now a correspondent in the Beijing bureau, was based in Moscow for The New York Times from 1998 to 2003.

TIMELINE The Cold War



1945-47 Europe Divided

U.S., British, and Soviet leaders plan for postwar Europe at the Yalta Conference in 1945. Two years later, after the Soviets install Communist regimes across Eastern Europe, the Truman Doctrine says the U.S. will protect countries resisting Communist aggression.

1948-49 Berlin Airlift

In June 1948, the Soviet Union blockades West Berlin, the only part of East Germany not under Soviet control. The U.S. and its allies fly in supplies daily to keep the city from starving. The Soviets lift the blockade in May 1949.

1950-53 Korean War

Communist North Korea invades South Korea in June 1950. U.N. forces, led by the U.S., defend South Korea, while China backs the North. The war, in which 36,000 Americans die, lasts three years and ends in a stalemate.

1957 Sputnik

The Soviets send the first satellite into orbit, catching the U.S. off guard and launching the "space race." The U.S. ultimately "wins" when it lands the first men on the moon in July 1969.

1961 Berlin Wall

To prevent its citizens from leaving, Communist East Germany builds a wall to separate itself from West Germany and the rest of Western Europe, which aren't under Soviet control.

Institution in Washington. "The terror of it was very real."

In 1956, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev casually told Western diplomats, "History is on our side. We will bury you."

By the 1970s, many Americans—and much of the world—wondered if he could be right: Soviet-backed guerrillas had defeated American forces in Vietnam, the U.S. economy was suffering from soaring inflation, and a criminal scandal known as Watergate had forced President Richard Nixon to resign in 1974.

Actually, Khrushchev was wrong.

Steering Toward Oblivion

America pulled out of its tailspin by the 1980s. But the Soviet leadership steered the U.S.S.R. toward oblivion. The regime imprisoned dissidents, crushed democratic movements in Czechoslovakia and Poland, invaded neighboring Afghanistan in 1979—and lost support worldwide.

Afghanistan became the Soviets'

Vietnam. Backed by U.S. weapons and expertise, Muslims from Pakistan and the Middle East who viewed the Soviet invaders as infidels rushed into Afghanistan, killing more than 14,000 Soviet troops and wounding 50,000 more before Moscow admitted defeat in 1988. The war only fanned Russians' anger at their leaders.

At the same time, a dying Soviet economy was sinking under incompetent government direction. State-run industries turned out broken tractors. Crops rotted in fields for lack of trucks to get them to market. Bureaucrats decided what to manufacture, and people waited years to buy a car or get a phone—or bribed someone to jump the line.

In 1985, an energetic reformer named Mikhail Gorbachev took the reins of the Soviet Union. He thawed icy relations with Western nations, relaxed curbs on what people could say and read with a policy known as *glasnost*, or openness—and tried to loosen the calcified economy with free-

market reforms known as *perestroika*.

"I still entertained illusions that the system could be reformed," he told *Time* magazine in 2003. But it was too late.

Communist diehards sabotaged Gorbachev's economic reforms, and daily life grew even worse.

"One woman told me, 'The chains are gone. But so is the food,'" recalls *New York Times* reporter Serge Schmemmann, who was based in Moscow at the time.

Lowering the Hammer & Sickle

The end began in 1989, when Eastern Europe's puppet states allowed free elections, then opened their borders. In Berlin, East Germany opened the gates to the infamous Berlin Wall, and its citizens streamed out, delirious.

In December 1991, Russia—the largest and most significant of the 15 states that made up the Soviet Union—proclaimed its independence. Gorbachev soon bowed to the inevitable. At 7:32 p.m. on Christmas Day, the crimson



1962 Cuban Missile Crisis

U.S. spy planes discover nuclear sites being built by the Soviets in Cuba. After a 15-day standoff with President John F. Kennedy that takes the world to the brink of nuclear war, the Soviets remove the missiles.

1960s-1975 Vietnam War

The U.S. sends troops to aid South Vietnam in its war against Communist North Vietnam, which is supported by the Soviets and the Chinese. By the time the war ends in 1975, 58,000 Americans have died.

1979 Afghan Invasion

Soviet troops invade Afghanistan. With help from the U.S., Islamic insurgents known as *mujahedeens* (many of whom later become members of the Taliban and Al Qaeda) wage a 10-year guerrilla war against the Soviets, who withdraw in 1989.

1980s Gorbachev Rises, Berlin Wall Falls

Mikhail Gorbachev becomes the leader of the Soviet Union and introduces free-market reforms (*perestroika*) and a limited expansion of political freedom (*glasnost*). In 1989, he allows the toppling of the Berlin Wall (above).

1991 Soviet Collapse

After popular uprisings sweep away Communist regimes in much of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union formally disbands and Gorbachev gives up power, leaving the U.S. as the sole superpower.

hammer-and-sickle Soviet flag was lowered at the Kremlin, the home of the government in Moscow. The white, blue, and red Russian tricolor took its place.

The Soviet Union was no more. But what became of the dreams of a newly stable, democratic world?

The peaceful world some envisioned, presided over by a benevolent America, never came to pass. Without a common Soviet enemy, many nations that once allied themselves with the U.S. drifted away. Ironically, the Soviet threat of world destruction had made the West more stable, not less.

Left as the only superpower after Moscow's collapse, the U.S. also became a prime target for the rage of groups left out of the new global order. In Afghanistan, the same Islamic militants that the U.S. trained and equipped to defeat the Soviet army took power and turned that broken nation into a haven for Al Qaeda, the terrorist group behind the 9/11 attacks. (Osama bin Laden, one

of the young Muslim fighters against the Soviets, later turned his hatred toward America and became Al Qaeda's leader.)

The fortunes of the former Soviet republics and satellite states have been mixed. Today, the eastern European nations that escaped the Soviet orbit, like Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, are healthy and mostly prosperous democracies. Many of the Soviet Union's former states, especially those in central Asia, still have repressive governments, but even they don't rule their citizens as ruthlessly as before.

Vladimir Putin

Russia, the heart of the empire, flirted with democracy under its first post-Soviet leader, Boris Yeltsin, but slipped back to strongman rule when his successor, Vladimir Putin, took control in 1999. But even Putin—a former KGB spy who today serves as prime minister alongside President Dmitri Medvedev—has permitted citizens a life undreamed

of in Soviet times—as long as they do not challenge the Kremlin.

“You have open borders,” says Trenin, the Moscow scholar. “You can move if you want to move. You have freedom to own property, freedom to worship, freedom to say things.”

Advocates of democracy in Russia and in many other former Soviet states are still persecuted—and dispirited. “People's solidarity is very rare in Russia, and 1991 was a moment of solidarity, a moment for people's strengths,” says Boris Nemtsov, a Moscow opposition politician and democracy advocate. “Now Russians are so afraid that they want to forget these historic days.”

But changing a society that lived in virtual slavery for centuries, as Russia did under the tsars, doesn't happen overnight, he adds. Perhaps 1991 was just a start.

Asked whether he's optimistic about the future, Nemtsov replies, “Long term, yes. Short term, no.” ●