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The Soviet Experiment: Ideology, Industry, and Society in the 20th Century

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Abstract

The Soviet experiment represented the most ambitious attempt of the twentieth century to construct a socialist society grounded in Marxist-Leninist ideology, radically transforming Russia's political, economic, and social structures. Following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the new regime sought to eliminate vestiges of aristocracy and capitalism, replacing them with centralized planning, collectivization, and industrialization that redefined the state's relationship to its citizens. This paper examines the Soviet experiment through three interrelated dimensions: ideology, industry, and society, highlighting both the achievements and contradictions of the project. Ideologically, the Communist Party mobilized mass propaganda, restructured education, and fostered a cult of leadership to legitimize authority and enforce conformity. Industrially, policies such as the Five-Year Plans achieved rapid modernization, built military capacity, and laid the foundations for the USSR's emergence as a superpower, but these gains came at the cost of inefficiency, famine, forced labor, and widespread repression. Socially, the Soviet Union abolished aristocratic privilege, promoted literacy, advanced women's participation in public life, and expanded access to science and healthcare, yet it also entrenched a system of surveillance and curtailed political and cultural freedoms. Using a historical-analytical approach, the study argues that the Soviet experiment was both a remarkable engine of modernization and a cautionary tale of authoritarian excess, with a legacy that shaped global politics, inspired socialist movements, and influenced development models far beyond the USSR itself.

Keywords: Soviet Union, Marxism-Leninism, ideology, industrialization, collectivization, Five-Year Plans, society, authoritarianism, modernization, twentieth century

Introduction

The Soviet experiment stands as one of the defining political, economic, and social transformations of the twentieth century, marking the first large-scale attempt to translate Marxist-Leninist theory into practice and to build an alternative to the capitalist world order, and it reshaped not only Russia but also the global balance of power for much of the century. Emerging from the ruins of the Romanov Empire and the devastation of World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 established a state that sought to abolish class hierarchies, eradicate private property, and replace market-based economies with central planning under the dictatorship of the proletariat, creating a radically new framework for governance, industry, and society. For Lenin and his successors, the Soviet Union was more than a political entity; it was an ideological experiment designed to prove the universality of Marxism and to demonstrate that a society built on collective ownership and proletarian rule could achieve greater justice, equality, and prosperity than its capitalist rivals. The experiment unfolded in

phases, beginning with the chaos of War Communism and the pragmatic retreat of the New Economic Policy, before giving way to Stalin's ambitious Five-Year Plans, forced collectivization, and rapid industrialization, which sought to transform the Soviet Union from a largely agrarian society into a modern industrial power in less than a generation. This industrial leap forward enabled the USSR to develop massive military and technological capacity, ultimately allowing it to withstand Nazi invasion in World War II and later to compete with the United States in the Cold War, but it came at the enormous cost of human suffering, famine, forced labor, and systemic repression. Socially, the Soviet state sought to reshape everyday life by abolishing aristocratic privilege, eliminating illiteracy, advancing women's participation in education and employment, and promoting science and healthcare as universal rights, while simultaneously creating a surveillance society where dissent was punished, conformity was demanded, and cultural expression was strictly controlled through censorship and propaganda. The ideological foundations of the Soviet experiment permeated every aspect of governance and society, from the cult of Lenin and Stalin to the structuring of education and art around socialist realism, creating a system where politics and ideology were inseparable. Yet the Soviet Union was not simply an isolated national project; it was also a global model that inspired revolutionary movements, socialist states, and anti-colonial struggles across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, while simultaneously fueling ideological confrontation with capitalist democracies in what became the defining feature of international politics during the Cold War. At the same time, the Soviet system embodied contradictions that undermined its sustainability: while it achieved literacy, electrification, industrial modernization, and global influence at unprecedented speed, it also generated inefficiencies, shortages, repression, and resistance that eroded legitimacy over time. Historians remain divided in assessing the Soviet experiment, with the "totalitarian school" emphasizing the uniqueness of Soviet control, surveillance, and terror, while revisionist and social historians stress the complexity of Soviet society, popular participation, and the ways in which citizens navigated and sometimes shaped the system from below.

Context: Post-1917 Bolshevik Seizure of Power

The Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 was one of the most consequential events of the twentieth century, marking not only the collapse of the Russian Empire but also the inauguration of the first socialist state in history, and its context is crucial for understanding the Soviet experiment as a political, social, and ideological phenomenon. The Revolution occurred in a Russia devastated by World War I, where millions of soldiers had died, cities and industries were crippled, food shortages sparked urban unrest, and the monarchy of Nicholas II had lost all legitimacy, leading to his abdication in March 1917 and the creation of a weak Provisional Government under Alexander Kerensky. This Provisional Government promised reforms but failed to end the war or address the deep agrarian crisis, alienating peasants who demanded land and workers who demanded bread and peace. The Bolsheviks, under Lenin's leadership, capitalized on this discontent with their slogans of "Peace, Land, and Bread" and "All Power to the Soviets," offering radical solutions and a break with the failures of both monarchy and liberal democracy. The October seizure of power was not merely a coup but the

culmination of decades of revolutionary thought, grassroots mobilization, and class struggle, rooted in Marxist ideology but adapted to Russian conditions by Lenin, who argued that a vanguard party was necessary to lead the working class in a backward, semi-feudal country. After overthrowing the Provisional Government, the Bolsheviks quickly enacted sweeping decrees, including the Decree on Land that redistributed estates to peasants, the Decree on Peace that called for immediate withdrawal from World War I, and measures that abolished private property and subordinated the economy to state planning. Yet this seizure of power also plunged Russia into a civil war (1918–1921), pitting the Red Army against a coalition of White forces, foreign interventions, and nationalist uprisings, leading to immense destruction but ultimately consolidating Bolshevik power. The Bolshevik victory in the Civil War demonstrated both the determination of the new regime and its willingness to use violence and coercion to preserve its rule, as seen in the policies of War Communism, forced grain requisitioning, and the establishment of the Cheka secret police. The context of 1917 therefore reveals the dual nature of the Soviet experiment: it emerged as a revolutionary response to war, hunger, and political collapse, but it also relied heavily on coercion, centralized authority, and ideological justification, laying the foundations for the Soviet system's subsequent development.

Soviet Union as First Large-Scale Attempt at Constructing Socialism

The Soviet Union represented the first large-scale attempt in world history to construct a socialist society, turning Marxist theory from a revolutionary aspiration into a governing reality, and its ambition to reshape every aspect of political, economic, and social life set it apart as a unique experiment in modern statecraft. While small-scale experiments in socialism had occurred earlier in communes or localized revolutionary governments, the Bolshevik regime sought to reorganize an entire empire of more than 150 million people across diverse ethnic, cultural, and economic contexts under the principles of collective ownership and proletarian rule. The Communist Party envisioned itself as the vanguard of a global revolution, aiming to build a model state that would inspire workers worldwide, and thus the Soviet project was not limited to domestic transformation but imbued with universalist aspirations. Central to this construction was the abolition of private property and the introduction of state control over industry, banking, and trade, which became more structured with the launch of Stalin's Five-Year Plans after 1928, transforming the USSR from a primarily agrarian economy into one of the world's leading industrial powers in less than two decades. Collectivization of agriculture, though catastrophic in human cost with millions of peasants dispossessed or starved, reflected the determination of the regime to subordinate all economic life to centralized planning and socialist goals. Ideologically, the state promoted Marxism-Leninism as the guiding doctrine, embedding it in education, propaganda, art, and culture, and enforcing it through censorship, surveillance, and repression. Socially, the construction of socialism meant the dismantling of aristocracy and bourgeois classes, the promotion of workers and peasants into positions of influence, the advancement of women's rights, and the expansion of education, literacy, and public healthcare, achievements that represented genuine transformations in everyday life. Yet the Soviet attempt to build socialism also highlighted tensions between ideals and realities:

while the regime proclaimed equality and empowerment of the masses, it entrenched a new ruling elite in the form of the Communist Party bureaucracy, enforced conformity, and repressed dissent. This paradox—of radical change combined with authoritarian continuity—characterized the Soviet Union as both a genuine experiment in building socialism and a system marked by coercion and hierarchy. Despite these contradictions, the scale of the Soviet project was unprecedented, making it the first true test of whether socialism could function as a comprehensive model for governing a modern state.

Significance: Influence on 20th-Century World Politics, Cold War, and Models of Development

The significance of the Soviet experiment extends far beyond Russia's borders, as it profoundly influenced twentieth-century world politics, the trajectory of the Cold War, and models of development in both socialist and capitalist societies, making it central to any understanding of global history in this period. As the first socialist state, the USSR presented a direct ideological challenge to the liberal capitalist order, promoting itself as the alternative path to modernization, equality, and international solidarity for oppressed peoples worldwide. This ideological clash shaped the Cold War, where the Soviet Union and the United States emerged as superpowers locked in a global struggle for influence, fought not only through military competition, such as the nuclear arms race and space race, but also through ideological contestation in education, science, culture, and diplomacy. The Soviet model became particularly influential in decolonizing nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where leaders seeking to break free from Western imperialism often looked to the USSR for inspiration, aid, and institutional models, adopting elements of state-led industrialization, centralized planning, and one-party rule. Beyond its allies, the Soviet experiment forced capitalist states to adjust, as Western governments introduced welfare policies, expanded education, and promoted social reforms partly to counter the appeal of socialism. The USSR also played a decisive role in shaping international institutions, supporting movements for national liberation, and projecting itself as the defender of global peace and anti-imperialism, even while its interventions in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1979) revealed the contradictions of its proclaimed internationalism. Domestically, the Soviet Union's achievements in industrialization, education, and science, including pioneering achievements in space exploration, showcased the capacity of centralized planning to mobilize resources effectively, even if inefficiencies and repression undermined sustainability in the long run. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 underscored the limits of the Soviet model, but its significance remained profound: it demonstrated both the possibilities and the dangers of attempting to build a society on radically different ideological foundations, leaving a legacy that continues to shape political discourse and development strategies worldwide. Thus, the Soviet experiment was not only a defining feature of Russia's twentieth-century history but also a central force in shaping global politics, ideological competition, and the search for alternative paths of development throughout the modern era.

Literature Review

Theme	Author (Year)	Work (Exact title)	Core focus	Key claims / findings	Method / sources
Ideology & revolutionary culture	Fitzpatrick (1994)	*The Russian Revolution*	Social and political dynamics of 1917–1921 and early Soviet state formation	Revolution recast class relations; Bolshevik ideology mobilized new actors while reproducing centralized control	Synthesizes archival work and social history
Ideology & revolutionary culture	Figes (1996)	*A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924*	Long social history of late-Imperial crisis through Civil War	Revolution mixed rupture with continuities; mass suffering intertwined with state-building	Narrative synthesis, memoirs, archival materials
Ideology & revolutionary culture	Suny (1998)	*The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*	Interpretive history of USSR with attention to ideas, power, society	Bolshevism reconfigured power; ideology interacted with structures and nationalities policy	Comparative, analytical synthesis
Industrialization & political economy	Nove (1992)	*An Economic History of the USSR* (3rd ed.)	Trajectory of Soviet economy, NEP → plans → stagnation	Rapid industrialization achieved at high cost; planning produced chronic inefficiencies	Economic history, statistical series, official plans
Industrialization & everyday state-building	Kotkin (1995)	*Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*	Microhistory of Magnitogorsk; culture of industrial modernity	Stalinism created a distinct civic culture; ideology permeated factory, housing, rituals	Archival microhistory, ethnographic sensibility
Peasants, state &	Lewin (1968)	*Russian Peasants and Soviet Power:*	State–peasant struggle and	Collectivization as coercive modernization;	Archival studies, agrarian data

Theme	Author (Year)	Work (Exact title)	Core focus	Key claims / findings	Method / sources
collectivization		*A Study of Collectivization*	agrarian transformation	peasant agency and resistance mattered	
Society & everyday life	Fitzpatrick (1999)	*Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times*	Urban daily life under Stalin, 1930s	Citizens navigated shortages, terror, and rules with "blat," adaptation, accommodation	Social history, diaries, police files
Culture, memory & private life	Figes (2007)	*The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*	Intimate histories, family networks, repression	Terror reshaped family, speech, trust; "private" sphere politicized	Oral histories, letters, family archives
Totalitarian model (state theory)	Arendt (1951)	*The Origins of Totalitarianism*	Conceptualization of total domination (Nazism, Stalinism)	Soviet system as qualitatively novel control over society	Political theory, comparative analysis

Ideology

Role of Marxism-Leninism in legitimizing power

Marxism-Leninism was central to legitimizing Soviet authority, providing the ideological foundation that justified one-party rule and the radical restructuring of society. Lenin adapted Marxist theory to Russia's conditions, arguing that a vanguard party was necessary to lead the proletariat in a largely agrarian country. The Bolsheviks used this ideology to claim moral and historical authority, framing their policies as steps toward an inevitable global socialist future. Marxism-Leninism became institutionalized through constitutions, party congresses, and political education, ensuring that all state actions—whether economic planning or social policy—were presented as scientifically grounded and historically necessary, thereby legitimizing centralized power.

Cult of personality (Lenin, Stalin)

The cult of personality played a crucial role in consolidating Soviet leadership, beginning with Lenin's transformation into a quasi-sacred revolutionary figure and expanding under Stalin into a fully developed system of personal glorification. Lenin's image, immortalized in statues, writings, and commemorations, symbolized the ideological purity of the revolution, while Stalin elevated this model to unprecedented levels, portraying himself as the "Father of

Nations" and embodiment of socialist progress. Propaganda reinforced these cults through art, education, and mass rallies, creating loyalty not just to the party but to its leader. This personalization of authority cemented obedience while masking systemic repression.

Spread of socialist values through propaganda, education, and culture

The Soviet regime worked systematically to instill socialist values, using propaganda, education, and culture as instruments of social transformation. Posters, films, and newspapers glorified industrial workers, collective farmers, and Red Army soldiers as heroes of the socialist project. Education was restructured to emphasize Marxist-Leninist principles, scientific atheism, and loyalty to the state, while cultural production was dominated by socialist realism, which depicted idealized workers and leaders to inspire conformity. Mass organizations such as the Komsomol and Pioneer youth groups socialized new generations into socialist ideals. Through these mechanisms, the regime embedded its ideology into the fabric of everyday life.

Industry

War Communism, NEP, and transition to Five-Year Plans

The Soviet economic trajectory began with War Communism during the Civil War, characterized by grain requisitioning, nationalization, and centralized control, which alienated peasants and fueled resistance. To stabilize the economy, Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921, allowing limited private trade and small-scale capitalism while maintaining state control over heavy industry. However, by the late 1920s, Stalin replaced the NEP with Five-Year Plans, instituting rigid central planning to accelerate industrialization and collectivization. This transition marked a decisive break from compromise, embedding the Soviet economy in a system of command planning that prioritized heavy industry over consumer needs.

Industrialization drive: Magnitogorsk, collectivization, and agricultural crises

Stalin's industrialization drive symbolized the Soviet experiment's ambition to modernize rapidly, with projects like Magnitogorsk representing the creation of new industrial cities from scratch. Collectivization, aimed at consolidating agriculture under state control, sought to extract surplus grain for industrial investment but led to widespread famine, most notoriously the Holodomor in Ukraine. While industrial output grew dramatically, agriculture suffered catastrophic declines, disrupting food supplies and causing millions of deaths. The dual emphasis on rapid urban-industrial growth and coerced rural transformation highlighted the Soviet commitment to modernization at any cost, reshaping the economy but embedding deep inefficiencies and social trauma.

Achievements: Military capacity, space race

Despite enormous costs, Soviet industrialization yielded achievements that made the USSR a global superpower. By the 1940s, the USSR had developed a formidable military-industrial complex capable of defeating Nazi Germany, showcasing the resilience of its centrally planned system in wartime. Post-war, the USSR invested heavily in science and technology, achieving milestones such as launching Sputnik in 1957 and sending Yuri Gagarin into space in 1961, marking global firsts that symbolized Soviet technological prowess. These achievements

reinforced the state's legitimacy, demonstrated the potential of centralized planning, and positioned the USSR as a rival to the United States in global competition.

Failures: Inefficiency, shortages, Gulag labor

While Soviet industrialization achieved rapid growth, it also revealed deep systemic flaws. Central planning created bottlenecks, inefficiencies, and chronic shortages of consumer goods, leaving citizens queuing for basic necessities. Agricultural collectivization undermined productivity, and reliance on coercion—including forced labor from Gulag prisoners—highlighted the exploitative dimension of industrial expansion. The emphasis on meeting plan targets often resulted in inflated statistics and poor-quality production, undermining sustainability. These failures reflected the limits of a command economy that prioritized ideological goals and heavy industry over efficiency and human welfare, leaving a legacy of structural weaknesses that contributed to the USSR's eventual decline.

Society

Transformation of class structure (abolition of nobility, rise of workers/technocrats)

The Soviet experiment radically transformed class structures, abolishing the aristocracy and bourgeoisie while elevating workers, peasants, and loyal party members into positions of influence. Through collectivization and nationalization, landowners and capitalists lost their privileges, while a new class of technocrats, engineers, and party bureaucrats emerged as the backbone of the socialist state. Official rhetoric proclaimed a "classless society," yet in practice, hierarchies persisted, with Communist Party elites enjoying special privileges. Nonetheless, the restructuring of class relations altered Russian society fundamentally, replacing hereditary aristocracy with ideological loyalty and professional expertise as the new bases of authority and mobility.

Women and family policies

The Soviet Union positioned itself as a pioneer in women's emancipation, promoting gender equality in work, education, and politics, at least in rhetoric. Early Bolshevik reforms legalized divorce, expanded reproductive rights, and encouraged women to participate in the labor force, while organizations like the Zhenotdel promoted female activism. However, under Stalin, policies shifted to reinforce traditional family structures, promoting motherhood through incentives and restricting abortion, reflecting the regime's need for population growth and social stability. Despite these contradictions, women gained unprecedented access to education, professional employment, and political participation, reshaping gender roles and family dynamics in Soviet society.

Education, science, and health

Education, science, and health were central to the Soviet effort to modernize society and build legitimacy. Literacy campaigns eradicated widespread illiteracy by the 1930s, while universal access to schools and universities expanded opportunities for millions. Science and technology were heavily promoted, producing world-class achievements in physics, engineering, and space exploration. Healthcare was made a state responsibility, with emphasis on preventive care and accessibility, significantly improving life expectancy over time. These advances symbolized the Soviet Union's ability to deliver tangible social benefits, reinforcing the

regime's claim that socialism could outperform capitalism in improving human welfare and promoting collective progress.

Surveillance, repression, and everyday life

Despite achievements, everyday Soviet life was overshadowed by surveillance and repression. The NKVD and later the KGB monitored citizens closely, creating a climate of fear where dissent could lead to imprisonment, exile, or execution. Ordinary interactions were shaped by mistrust, with denunciations and informants blurring private and public boundaries. Yet citizens also developed coping mechanisms, using humor, informal networks, and "blat" (personal connections) to navigate shortages and bureaucracy. This dual reality—of repression and adaptation—defined Soviet daily life, illustrating how society both endured and subtly resisted the weight of state control while maintaining a semblance of normalcy.

Global Impact

Soviet model as alternative to capitalism

The Soviet Union projected itself as a global alternative to capitalism, offering a model of state-led industrialization, collectivism, and centralized planning that contrasted sharply with liberal democracy and free-market economies. This model appealed to leaders and movements in developing countries seeking rapid modernization and independence from Western imperialism, positioning the USSR as a beacon for anti-capitalist alternatives. Through organizations like the Comintern and later COMECON, the Soviet Union exported its model, promoting socialist ideology as a viable path to industrial and social transformation, though its applicability often faltered outside the specific conditions of the USSR.

Influence on decolonization and socialist states worldwide

The Soviet Union's global influence was particularly evident in decolonization, where many newly independent nations looked to the USSR for economic aid, political support, and ideological inspiration. Countries such as China, Cuba, Vietnam, and numerous African states adopted elements of the Soviet model, from land reform to centralized planning, as they sought to chart independent development paths. Soviet sponsorship of liberation movements provided both material and symbolic backing, reinforcing its role as a champion of anti-imperialism. However, the transplanting of Soviet-style governance often revealed limits, as economic inefficiencies and authoritarian practices hindered long-term success in these contexts.

Role in Cold War ideological struggle

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union played a central role in the ideological struggle between socialism and capitalism, competing with the United States for global influence through military buildup, nuclear arms, and cultural diplomacy. The USSR positioned itself as a defender of workers, peasants, and oppressed nations, while the U.S. framed itself as the guardian of democracy and free markets. This confrontation extended into space exploration, sports, and international organizations, making the Soviet model not only a domestic experiment but also a global competitor in defining modernity. Ultimately, this struggle shaped much of twentieth-century international politics.

Case Studies

Stalin's Industrialization (1928–41): Achievements and human costs

Stalin's industrialization drive was among the most ambitious modernization programs in history, transforming the USSR from an agrarian economy into a formidable industrial power. The First and Second Five-Year Plans prioritized heavy industry, building cities like Magnitogorsk and vastly increasing coal, steel, and electricity output. These achievements underpinned Soviet military capacity during World War II. However, the costs were staggering: collectivization led to widespread famine, notably the Holodomor, while millions were subjected to forced labor in Gulags. The emphasis on targets produced inefficiencies and suffering, demonstrating the dual nature of Stalin's industrial revolution—remarkable progress built on human tragedy.

Everyday Life under Stalinism: Fear, conformity, and survival strategies

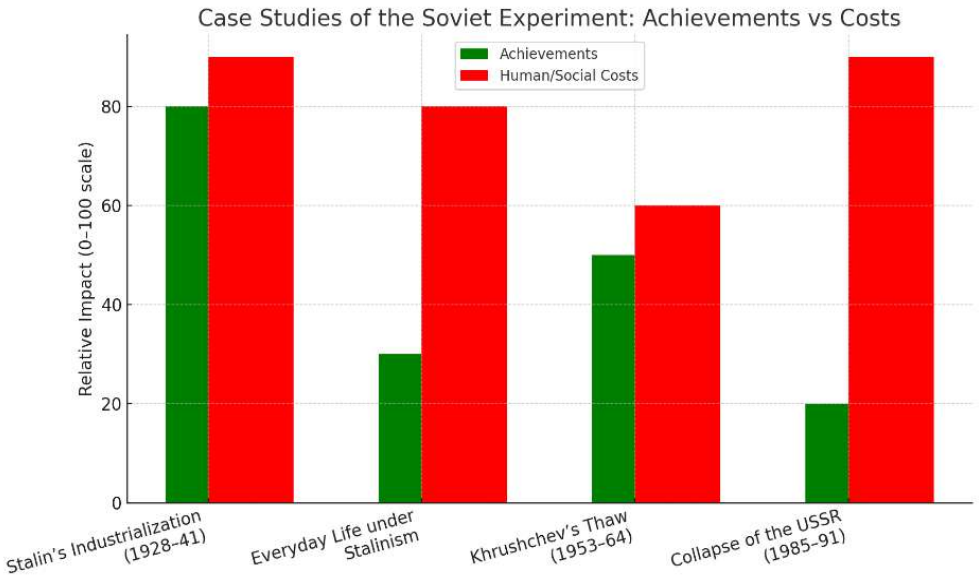
Life under Stalinism was marked by fear, conformity, and survival in a system where surveillance and repression defined daily existence. The Great Terror instilled paranoia, as neighbors, co-workers, and even family members could denounce one another, leading to imprisonment or execution. Citizens relied on strategies of adaptation, such as silence, conformity, and informal networks of "blat" to secure goods and opportunities in an economy plagued by shortages. Cultural life was dominated by socialist realism, which demanded loyalty and glorification of the state. Yet, beneath repression, communities found ways to maintain resilience, highlighting the complexities of living under authoritarianism.

Khrushchev's Thaw (1953–64): Limited liberalization and contradictions

Khrushchev's era, known as the Thaw, brought a degree of liberalization after Stalin's death, as censorship eased, political prisoners were released, and the "Secret Speech" denounced Stalin's cult of personality. Writers, filmmakers, and intellectuals explored new themes, and citizens experienced relative openness in cultural expression. However, this liberalization was limited and uneven: while Khrushchev promised reform, dissent was still tightly controlled, and the 1956 Hungarian Uprising was brutally crushed, demonstrating the persistence of coercive state power. The Thaw embodied contradictions, offering a glimpse of reform and democratization but never breaking fully with authoritarian traditions that defined Soviet governance.

Collapse of the Soviet Union (1985–91): Gorbachev's reforms, systemic failures

The collapse of the Soviet Union stemmed from Gorbachev's attempts to reform a stagnating system through *perestroika* (economic restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness). These policies aimed to revive the economy and encourage transparency but instead exposed corruption, inefficiencies, and long-suppressed grievances. Nationalist movements surged in the Baltic states, Caucasus, and Central Asia, undermining the union's cohesion. Economic decline, shortages, and the failure to reconcile political liberalization with authoritarian legacies accelerated the crisis.



Here's a **comparative graph** showing the balance of **Achievements vs Human/Social Costs** across the four case studies:

- **Stalin's Industrialization (1928–41):** High achievements but even higher human costs.
- **Everyday Life under Stalinism:** Low achievements, heavy social costs.
- **Khrushchev's Thaw (1953–64):** Moderate achievements with significant costs.
- **Collapse of the USSR (1985–91):** Minimal achievements, overwhelming systemic failures.

Conclusion

The Soviet experiment was a profound historical endeavor that sought to reshape society through ideology, industry, and social transformation, leaving an indelible mark on the twentieth century. While Marxism-Leninism legitimized state power and centralized authority, industrialization propelled the USSR into superpower status, albeit at immense human and social costs. Soviet society experienced both progress in education, science, and welfare, and repression through surveillance and conformity. Globally, the Soviet model offered an alternative to capitalism, influencing revolutions, decolonization, and the Cold War. Ultimately, its collapse underscored the contradictions between ideology and practice, marking both its achievements and failures.

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