

The Fall of the Soviet Union: Implications for Pakistan

The most important political development of the past fifty years, has been the fall of the mighty Soviet Union in 1991. A Super Power simply melted away while the rest of the world looked on in disbelief. At the same time, the Soviet bloc also disappeared, putting an end to the fearsome confrontation with the US-led Western alliance which had dominated global politics for nearly half a century. The Soviet Union itself broke up into several new States.

The post-Soviet world is a very different scene. Most importantly, the human race does not live any longer under the horrendous threat of a global nuclear holocaust. Whatever crises remain in the world are local or regional in nature. The world is now uni-polar with the United States emerging as the only Super Power. That poses problems of its own, which warrant separate consideration. However, this analysis is confined to taking a look-back at the reasons for the fall of the Soviet Union, as to how and where it went wrong; and the conclusions and implications therefrom which could be drawn by the rest of the world, including a country like Pakistan. An objective analysis is, perhaps, still not easy as there has been so much propaganda for and against the Soviet State ever since its founding in 1917 and the ideological controversy continues. Nevertheless, an attempt to make a dispassionate evaluation seems worthwhile.

The Marxist philosophy, which inspired Lenin and the October Revolution, was an odd mixture of idealism and historical half-truths. It was based on a highly dogmatic and

selective interpretation of human history and man's behaviour. Its evaluation of the historic role and the relative importance of the working class was unbalanced, if not lop-sided. Its claim about the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' seemed absurd when judged against the actual situation in the Soviet Union and other Communist States where the Communist Party—or more accurately the top leadership of the Party—held all the strings of power and the proletariat was no more than pawns in their hands. Similarly, its prognosis about the future of mankind was largely unrealistic, notably its belief that, after the establishment of the socialist society, the State would simply 'wither away'. As it turned out, more than seventy years after the Soviet Union was established, the State was showing no sign of withering away and had, on the contrary, become even more powerful and all-pervasive than ever before. Ironically, though, by a quirk of fortune, it turned out to be the Soviet State which suddenly went out of existence. But the State as an institution survived even here, with the re-emergence of the Russian State.

There were other Communist promises and predictions, which remained unfulfilled or turned out to be false. The workers and peasants were supposed to rule the Socialist State but the Soviet peasant was all but liquidated in bloody purges conducted by Stalin in the 1930s. During the collectivization campaign, 6.5 million people lost their lives, one-third of them in Central Asia.¹ The lot of the Soviet worker was paradoxical. While all praise was showered on him as a kind of a ritual, he was virtually denied even his fundamental right to go on strike. In fact, power was never in the hands of the workers. From the beginning, it was the Communist Party that was in control. The party itself was, for the greater part, dancing to the tune of the top boss, particularly under Stalin.

The Soviet propaganda made all kinds of claims about fundamental human rights, people's democracy and freedom, but much of this was denied to the people living in the Soviet bloc. The periodic elections held in this 'democracy' were a ritual farce in which 99 per cent amongst the voters duly voted in favour of whatever those in power wanted them to do. The

press printed only the official line and read like a drab recital of government and party engagements. Nothing critical or different could be published. The whole country was supposed to have the same opinion on a given issue and, indeed, the thinking was done for the citizens by the party and the government itself! At the whim of the Party leader, an erstwhile hero could overnight become a traitor and an enemy of the people. History was rewritten from time to time to accommodate the twists in the thinking of the current party leader. This was the truth about Soviet-style freedom and democracy. Anyone showing dissent was considered a counter-revolutionary or traitor and a threat to the state and society. The ever-present secret police was watching everyone. Any kind of dissent could result in arrest, interrogation, torture, jail, and execution or exile to Siberia or elsewhere, depending upon the gravity of the offence in the eyes of the authorities. Millions of people were killed in bloody purges and millions were forced to leave their homes and live in exile.

The Leninist-Marxist theory apart, in reality, the Soviet State became all-powerful and the average citizen was no more than a pawn in the hands of the authorities. Everything was done in the name of the people, but the people had very little say in the running of their own affairs. As a result of years of brutal repression and propaganda, the average Soviet citizen was turned into a docile and unquestioning camp follower, if not a robot. In every way, there seemed to be a great discrepancy between theory and practice. Democracy meant dictatorship; freedom meant enslavement; and people's rule meant the Party's rule. Religious freedom was proclaimed but everything was done to curb religion.

Self-determination was the official policy but this was never practised at home. The constituent fifteen Republics of the USSR were supposed to have the right to secede and each had its own President and Foreign Minister, giving the appearance of being autonomous or sovereign. On the contrary, the Republics slavishly followed Moscow's wishes in every respect. It was often arranged that an ethnic Russian was holding the number

two position in the Republic and most key posts in the hierarchy were held by Russians. Of course, the KGB was always watching and it was ensured that the 'independent' Republic toed Moscow's every wish and command. Russification was enforced in the Muslim Central Asian Republics and even names were changed. The Arabic script was abolished and the Cyrillic script was adopted. This cut off the new generations of Muslims from their cultural and religious roots. Suppression of Islam was rigorously followed. There were about 26000 mosques in Central Asia in 1917 but only about 400 were functioning by 1985. The Quran was not available anywhere and even if a Muslim was able to get a copy somehow, it was more than likely that he could not read the Arabic script, since teaching of religion was banned.

The Communist Party ran the show most of the time but, under Stalin, one-man rule of the most despotic nature almost entirely eclipsed the Party itself. Stalin unleashed the worst kind of terror. Indeed, succeeding Soviet rulers themselves had to admit that millions were liquidated by him and even more sent into exile. Ironically, all of this was done in the name of the people, democracy, and freedom. Though the worst oppression ended with the death of Stalin in 1953, the coercive apparatus for enforcing thought control, the secret police, surveillance, torture, and intimidation continued under the later rulers as well. 'Big brother' was always watching. Indeed, the Soviet Union resembled a vast prison where it seemed everyone was under watch, with no escape routes. A citizen needed permission to travel from one city to another. Telephones were tapped and letters were censored. Photocopying was punishable. Yet the Soviet propaganda claimed that the people had every freedom.

Another Soviet claim was that there was complete freedom of religion but, in reality, the situation was the opposite. The State machinery was fully mobilized to suppress religion. Atheism was taught as a compulsory subject in educational institutions, even to foreign students. There was relentless propaganda against religion. The preaching of religion or any kind of missionary activity was banned. Old churches and

mosques were mostly shut down and converted into museums or restaurants and even bars. Bukhara had more than 300 mosques before the Communist take-over in 1920 but only three were left in the mid-1980s where only a handful of old men could be seen attending prayers. Young people were conspicuous by their absence, the theory being that they were enlightened and no longer believed in old superstitions. The authorities evidently did not mind some old people attending mosques or churches, as this gave some credibility to the claim that there was freedom of religion. The young, of course, could face varying degrees of persecution for going to mosques. At the minimum, their educational career and job prospects could be jeopardized if their religious inclinations came to notice. But it could get far nastier than that, as many found out to their regret.

A group of Moscow-based Ambassadors, who visited Kazan, an ancient Islamic city east of Moscow, in the Tatar Autonomous Republic, in 1987 found only one functioning mosque there. During a meeting with the President of the Republic, his attention was drawn to the promise of Lenin in 1918 to the Muslims of Kazan and all Russia that they would have full religious freedom and that the Czarist policy of demolition of their mosques etc. would be abandoned. The President was asked as to why there was only one mosque left in Kazan. Visibly embarrassed, the President asked his deputy to shed some light. The latter replied blandly that there could be any number of mosques if the people wanted them. The local rule was that a mosque could be opened if ten citizens were to make an application to the authorities. Evidently, however, in a city of one million, not even ten such Muslims could be found! The Tatar Republic had a Muslim majority. The President bore the classical Muslim name Umar—Russified as Umarov—but he made it clear that he was only a 'cultural' Muslim. This meant that he was not a believer although, culturally, he had a Muslim background.

Incidentally, with the fall of the Soviet Union, hundreds of mosques have been reopened in such Muslim areas and new ones have been built, proving that Communist suppression could

not destroy Islam despite the outward appearances in the Soviet era. The same, of course, has been the case with the Christian and Jewish places of worship. In fact, most people during the Communist period had remained believers, though publicly they would say otherwise. It was revealing that even Communist Party bosses in the Central Asian Republics and other Muslim areas, who were professed atheists, were known to have been given a religious burial in the Islamic tradition. After their death, evidently, they no longer needed to prove their pretensions of atheism. When asked as to how such a contradiction could exist, the reply would be that the Islamic burial was being given to please the old relatives who believed in those sort of things; otherwise, the dead leader was an enlightened person!

Similarly, most Muslim couples secured an Islamic *Nikah* (marriage vows) after their civil marriage, thus taking no chances about the legitimacy of their wedding and their progeny. On some visits to Central Asia in the mid-1980s, while serving as Pakistan's Ambassador in Moscow, I found that local officials would toe the official line in formal meetings, but when they would get a chance to be alone with me, some recited the *Kalima* (Islamic affirmation of the oneness of God) to show their Islamic adherence. A local official named Abdulkarimov, when alone with me clarified angrily that his actual name was Abdul Karim, a typical Arabic-Islamic name. Under the Soviet system, all names including those of Muslims had to have a Russian-style ending. Indeed, some local officials in Soviet Central Asia privately expressed their support and admiration for the Afghan Mujahideen fighting Soviet troops in Afghanistan in those days and reviled in the Soviet media as bandits and cut-throats.

The Soviet system did have a number of positive features. There was a basic commitment to egalitarianism and social justice. Public good was given priority over individual benefits. Also, there was little evidence among the dominant Russians of any racial superiority of the kind shown by Europeans and Americans towards other races. Though the real power apparatus was undoubtedly in the hands of the Russians in the Central Asian Republics, menial jobs, like sweeping the streets were

being done by Russian women. Stalin and Khrushchev, the two most powerful Soviet dictators, were not ethnic Russians.

Illiteracy was largely eradicated in the Soviet Union and the number of scientists and PhDs produced by the country was quite remarkable. Women were, in general, given equality and were fully involved in the work force. (However, top political assignments were rarely given to women.) There was promotion of culture, including regional cultures: some famous old Islamic monuments in Samarkand were beautifully renovated. There was a great deal of emphasis on learning foreign languages. Law and order was generally good; the crime rate was low and life was disciplined and orderly. Prices were stable and the basic necessities were inexpensive. Education and health facilities were free. There was very little unemployment (though this was done by the expedient of creating new jobs even where there was no need). Most notably, of course, the country managed to come a long way since 1917 in technological progress. Indeed the Soviet Union had succeeded in becoming a Super Power and being the first to reach the space.

In spite of these Soviet successes, the fact was that progress had been achieved at the cost of immense human suffering. 'Between 1920 and 1945 it is estimated that more than a quarter of the population of Central Asia died a violent death.'² While there have been monstrous cruelties in world history by individual conquerors, the world has hardly ever seen a system which was so brutal and coercive. There was no individual freedom and life was regimented. Despite the tall claims about the 'Soviet man', in reality, the ordinary citizen was treated as a faceless robot rather than as a human being. Conformity was enforced. Propaganda was continuous: usually false, dull, and contrived. The Soviet Union was portrayed as a paradise on earth whereas the rest of the world was supposed to be groaning under the worst oppression.

Life in the Soviet Union was monotonous and predictable, with hardly any variety or excitement. Consumer goods were in short supply and were shoddy in quality. There was little prospect of out-of-turn promotion, except for those with links to

the Communist Party. The talented had little incentive to work since their salaries were no better than those of their mediocre co-workers. Since a job was more or less ensured for everyone—in keeping with the claim that there was full employment—the inefficient and the incompetent had little to worry about. This disheartened even the competent and the talented workers. In a kind of perverse logic, the salaries of doctors, professors, and engineers were abysmally low. Doctors were paid less than chauffeurs.

There was no doubt some degree of idealism present in the early years after the 1917 Revolution. But the revolutionary fervour of Lenin's days was soon to vanish, as Stalin went on his bloody rampages for the next thirty years, when the brightest and the most idealistic among the communists were liquidated, leaving behind only the most servile and loyal. In later years, idealism seemed to be altogether missing in the Party which, with the passing of time, became almost a bureaucratic set-up. The *apparatchiks* in the Communist Party were a motley crowd of opportunists and career seekers who, while mouthing the usual shibboleths and clichés, were involved more in petty intrigues for power. It was this set-up which allowed a mediocre figure like Chernenko to rise to the top position of General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1984. He was a party faithful incarnate, but little else. Brezhnev had not been much brighter either and was, moreover, known for his hedonistic ways and corruption.

In the field of foreign affairs, the Soviet Union strongly espoused the cause of anti-colonialism and anti-racism. However, this was mainly done to weaken the influence of the Western colonial powers, as also to secure popularity and influence in the Third World, as a part of the relentless effort, through propaganda, intrigue, or outright conquest, to spread communism all over the world. While never tired of espousing the cause of democracy, self-determination, and human rights abroad, the Soviet Union itself followed a policy of ruthless subjugation of a number of nations, firstly, in the Soviet Union itself and, beyond that, in East Europe and in Mongolia. The

sporadic efforts made by the satellite nations to assert their independence were ruthlessly crushed, e.g. in East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Poland (1980). In fact, wherever the Soviet forces had reached by the end of the Second World War, communism was imposed under a Soviet stranglehold. Once a country somehow came under Soviet sway, it stayed that way. The only exception turned out to be Afghanistan.

The Soviet system was an unnatural growth based on coercion and fraud. Its theory, the diagnosis of history, as well as its prescription were simply wrong. Its actual implementation under Stalin took it towards directions which were never even dreamt of by Marx, and would probably have horrified Lenin. In retrospect, it seems astonishing as to how it could last seventy-four years. Eventually, the greatest failure of the Soviet Communist system, leading to its collapse, was probably the stagnation of its economy in the 1970s and its actual decline in the 1980s. The situation was aggravated and finally made impossible by the burden of the unending arms race with the far richer West. In the early phase of communist rule, there had no doubt been notable economic progress. But it had been achieved through centralized political stability, regimentation of the work force, slave labour, and the exploitation of the vast natural resources of the Soviet Union, and those of the Soviet Empire. By the 1960s, however, Soviet economic development had reached a plateau. Thereafter, it was a downward curve.

Lack of incentives, absence of competition, and centralized bureaucratic control in the Soviet system had led to this economic stagnation. There was great wastage in the 'command' economy in which projects were launched without proper feasibility. The economic deterioration was hastened by Brezhnev's foreign military adventures, notably the occupation of Afghanistan, the ever-growing burden of military expenditure, apart from the rampant corruption of his regime. Consequently, the Soviet Union in the 1980s had become a giant with the feet of clay. Its economic development was so lop-sided that it could excel in producing space ships but could not make decent battery

cells for torches, ordinary bulbs, or safety matches. The reason for this paradox was that where the authorities were determined to make progress, all the resources would be mobilized to produce excellent results but, where the state did not put high priority, the average product would be sub-standard. Thus, it was said that the Soviet Union was a Super Power with an economy of the Third World.

It was against this background of economic stalemate, and indeed downward slide, that the reformist group of Andropov and Gorbachev came to power around 1982, hoping to bring about a new dynamism in the economy. But the arms race against the West could not be halted. Increasingly, it emerged that while the West could sustain the mounting weight of defence expenditure, the Soviet economy kept sinking under the strain. Moreover, the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* ushered in by Gorbachev involved unleashing the freedom of thought. Thus, the genie was let loose and the repression of seventy years of Communist rule produced the popular backlash under which the Soviet Communist system and, ironically, Gorbachev himself were swept away into the dustbin of history.

The Soviet-style Communist system turned out to be a great failure, even though its original authors were motivated by idealistic egalitarian considerations. Its denial of the economic laws and market forces could not be sustained over a period of time. It ran out of steam mainly because the military ambitions of its rulers imposed an unbearable burden on its resources. What successes were achieved by the Soviets were secured at the cost of immense human suffering imposed on the people living in the Soviet bloc. The 'brave new world' of the Soviet Union was a cruel system based on enforced conformity producing a regulated and dull existence. The oppression unleashed by Stalin had few parallels in world history.

In this context, the astonishing thing has been the attitude towards the situation in the Soviet Union adopted by the intellectual left and the socialists. Right from the beginning, the oppression of the Bolshevik regime was well-documented and could not escape the notice of any careful observer. No doubt,

there was also a great deal of propaganda against the Soviet Union by the capitalist world, which sought every opportunity to denigrate the Communist rule. Nevertheless, it seems that many leftist intellectuals simply refused to look at the grim realities and kept portraying the Soviet Union in rosy colours. While shedding tears over the loss of democratic rights in dictatorial regimes around the world, the same intellectuals simply turned a blind eye to the monstrous cruelties of Stalin lasting over a period of three decades. But Stalin was not unique: the scale of oppression might have declined after him but the cruel state apparatus survived. The left, however, refused to see that practically all Communist regimes relied on the use of brute force to survive and were guilty of massive violation of human rights.

The Soviet Union's ambitions to spread Communism beyond its borders so as to bring the whole world under its sway created widespread apprehensions. Opposition to the spread of communism was thus morally sustainable, since the success of Soviet designs would have enslaved the whole world and taken human progress behind by some centuries. Even if the West had its own selfish motives in opposing Soviet Communism, the larger interests of humanity were served by the counter-response from the Western world, led by the USA, to 'contain' the outward flow of Communism through a chain of military alliances built on the periphery of the Soviet bloc. However, the eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation lasting over half-a-century created a highly dangerous environment in the world and distorted human development. Indeed, the Cold War was a traumatic experience for the whole world and smaller countries were, invariably, sucked into the vortex of the rivalries of the two power blocs.

While it lasted, the Soviet Union posed a serious security threat to Pakistan by supporting India in its hegemonic ambitions against Pakistan. Soviet military support for India was a decisive factor in the dismemberment of Pakistan in 1971. The Soviet Union also did significant harm to Pakistan by using its veto in the UN Security Council to block any resolution on Kashmir.

Thus, the UN was more or less rendered a neutral player on the Kashmir issue.

The disquieting fact of the matter is that, like the Soviet Union, Pakistan too has been forced, all through the past fifty years of its existence, to bear a disproportionate defence burden in its confrontation with India. It is undeniable that Pakistan has a much smaller economy than that of its rival. In relative terms, therefore, the price of keeping up with India has put severe strains on the Pakistani economy. This, in turn, has taken a heavy toll of Pakistan's energies and its priorities have all along been distorted. Thus, for example, the social sector has received minimal funds and literacy has remained very low. This has prevented all-round development. It has really been a kind of a vicious circle. An alarming consequence of this confrontation with India has been that Pakistan has also been destabilized internally.

The development of nuclear capability has, no doubt, given Pakistan's defence a big boost. But, the example of the Soviet Union shows that nuclear capability itself is not enough. It does not necessarily guarantee a country's survival. After all, the Soviet Union did possess thousands of nuclear warheads, ICBMs and the latest weaponry, but it collapsed without a shot being fired, notwithstanding its nuclear might. The Soviet economy proved to be its Achilles' heel and the ground simply gave in under its feet. It would be unwise to ignore this historical lesson since Pakistan's precarious economy can be its undoing as well. The truth is that living beyond means can be dangerous for nations, no less than it is for individuals.

NOTES

1. R. Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow* (1988), cited by Ahmed Rashid in *The Resurgence of Central Asia* (1995), p. 33.
2. R. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, (1990), cited by Ahmed Rashid, op. cit., p. 34.