Communist Party of the Soviet Union
1917-1991
Leading political and ideological organization of the Soviet Union

The Communist Party exercised all effective power within the Soviet Union, and, as the oldest and for a long time the only ruling Communist party in the world, carried heavy or controlling influence over the Communist parties of other countries. Marxist socialist thinking took root in Russia in the 1880s. Led by Georgii Plekhanov, a small group of Marxists formed (1883) the League for the Emancipation of Labor, stressing the revolutionary capabilities of the growing industrial proletariat. Other groups were soon founded, the largest of which was the Jewish Bund, and in 1898 they united to form the Russian Social Democratic Labor party. The second party congress (1903) in Brussels and London split the party into factions of Bolshevism and Menshevism. The Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, demanded a highly disciplined, centralized, and dedicated revolutionary elite rather than a mass party.

These principles guided the Bolsheviks before the 1917 revolution and remained the basis for the party during its years in power. When the social-democratic revolution began in Russia in March, 1917, the Bolsheviks were unprepared, and under the provisional government they played a minor role. With a total party membership of about 200,000, they faced the problem of governing alone or sharing power. Bolsheviks actually came to power in November 1917. Practically immediately Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky demanded party dictatorship and destroyed all opposition from Mensheviks and other socialist groups during the first months of 1918. During the Civil war (1918–20) the Bolshevik party that changed its name from 1918 to the All-Russian Communist party was at the height of its revolutionary ardor. As one of the demands of necessities of difficult revolutionary time, the party apparatus was strengthened at all levels. Bolshevik party tried to influence world working movement by establishing Comintern (the Third International) in March 1919. Its main purpose was to overthrow of the international bourgeoisie and to create the International Soviet republic as a transition stage to the complete abolition of the state. Communist parties similar to the Bolshevik's should be established across the world to aid the international proletarian revolution.
At lower levels, the organizational hierarchy was managed by Party Committees, which was headed by the elected secretary. The bottom level of the Party was the primary party organization or party cell. It was created within any organizational entity of any kind where there at least three communists. Membership in the party ultimately became a privilege, with a small subject of the general population of Party becoming an elite class or nomenclature in Soviet society. Nomenclature enjoyed many perquisites denied to the average Soviet citizen such as shopping at well-stocked stores, access to foreign merchandise, preference in obtaining housing, access to holiday resorts, being allowed to travel abroad, sent their children to the best universities, and obtain prestigious jobs (as well as party membership itself) for their children. It became virtually impossible to join the Soviet ruling and managing elite without being a member of the Communist Party.

During and in the aftermath of the World War II, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union extended its political and military influence over East European countries. Pro-Soviet Communist Parties won the elections in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria which subsequently became Stalinist dictatorships. These elections are generally regarded as rigged. The countries of Eastern Europe became Soviet satellite states – they were "independent" nations, which were one party Communist states whose General Secretary had to be approved by the Kremlin, and so their governments usually kept their policy in line with the wished of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev became Premier on March 27, 1958, seizing absolute power in the country – the tradition followed by all his predecessors and successors. The party became the dominant institution over the secret police and army. Aid to developing countries and scientific research, especially into space technology and weaponry, maintained the Soviet Union as one of the world's two major world powers. Khrushchev intended to provide economic reforms in the Soviet Union through the decentralization of economic apparatus by decision to replace industrial ministries by economic councils to be more responsible to local needs. Connected with this decentralization was Khrushchev's decision in 1962 to recast party organizations along economic, rather than administrative, lines. The resulting bifurcation of the party apparatus into industrial and agricultural sectors at the oblast level and below contributed to the disarray and alienated many party officials at all levels. By 1964 Khrushchev's prestige had been damaged in a number of areas. Industrial growth had slowed, while agriculture showed no new progress. In the international policy the split
with China, the Berlin Wall construction in 1961, and the Cuban crisis of 1962, and Khrushchev's efforts to improve relations with the West antagonized many in the military. In October 1964, while Khrushchev was vacationing in Crimea, the Presidium voted him out of the office.

Soviet party leaders were afraid of the returning of party dictatorship style that became visible more and more during late Khrushchev’s years. The principle of collective party leadership which was practically forgotten since Lenin times was revived again—show how, also at some point you need to address the principle of democratic centralism. Khrushchev was succeeded by Leonid Brezhnev, who was general secretary of the party till his death in 1982 and Alexei Kosygin as a head of the government. 1960s-1970s were characterized by additional attempts to improve organization and management of the Soviet economy. Complex economic reforms were inspired and directed by Alexei Kosygin. Kosygin’s program called for implementation of economic reforms strictly within a framework of centralized planning. First, the role of long-term plans was to be upgraded. The Five-Year Plan was made legally binding and was to be a directive for enterprises. Annual plans were drawn up taking into account the annual breakdowns set in Five Year Plans and incentive arrangements were supposed to allow for the degree of progress toward meeting of Five Year Plan targets. At the XXV Congress of the Communist party of the Soviet Union (1976), Brezhnev again stressed the importance of long-term plans and the urgent need to improve their quality. Second, the ‘scientific basis’ for planning was to be radically upgraded. In practice, this has meant the more expensive use of mathematical forecasting models, input-output data, and optimizing techniques in planning. Third, the system of plan indicators was to be directed more specifically toward solving problems of efficiency and product quality. Fourth, some planning authority was to be delegated to the enterprise level, with the aim of spurring initiative on the periphery. Despite the revival of some discussion of economic reform in the Party press in 1976, the reform even if implemented did more harm than good. Soviet international policy also suffered from the lack of flexibility. The article “Sovereignty and International Obligations of Socialist countries” which was published in ‘Pravda’ in September, 26, 1968 and later became known as ‘Brezhnev doctrine’ was defined as basic principle of Soviet international policy. Om practice this meant that communist parties of Eastern bloc was allowed only limited sovereignty, no country
would be allowed to leave the Warsaw pact, disturb a nation's communist party's monopoly on power, or in any way compromise the strength of the Eastern bloc. Implicit in this doctrine was that the leadership of the Soviet Union reserved, for itself, the right to define "socialism" and "capitalism". The doctrine was used to justify the invasions of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and of the non-Warsaw Pact nation of Afghanistan in 1979.

After Brezhnev’s death (1982) and his short-lived successors – Yuri Andropov (died in 1984) and Konstantin Chernenko (died in 1985), Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary (1985) ushering in a period of reform characterized by openness and restructuring. During the 1980s Soviet Union had to cope with a wide array of social, economic and political problems including social and ethnic tensions, consumer frustrations and political dissent. These internal problems ultimately challenged and affected the regime. Mikhail Gorbachev period can be characterized as the ‘last drama’ of the Cold War Mikhail Gorbachev as new and considerably young general secretary of the Communist party, had consolidated power with unprecedented speed, put in place an ambitious program for economic revitalization, set higher standards of accountability for the bureaucracy and improved the image of the Soviet leadership at home and abroad. Gorbachev was largely hailed in the West for his 'New Thinking' in foreign affairs. During his tenure, he sought to improve relations and trade with the West by reducing Cold War tensions. He established close relationships with several Western leaders, such as West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, American President Ronald Reagan, and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. XXVII Congress of the Communist party (February-March 1986) should deal with numerous internal and external problems. Gorbachev’s cadre policy – to replace government and party bureaucrats to increase efficiency, imagination and commitment – was at the focal point of the struggle. In January 1987, Gorbachev called for democratization: the infusion of democratic elements such as multi–candidate elections into the Soviet political process. In June 1988, at the 19th Party Conference, Gorbachev launched radical reforms meant to reduce party control of the government apparatus. In December 1988, the Supreme Soviet approved the establishment of a Congress of People's Deputies, which constitutional amendments had established as the Soviet Union's new legislative body. Elections to the congress were held throughout the
USSR in March and April 1989. On March 15, 1990, Gorbachev was elected as the first executive President of the Soviet Union.

In December 1988 Mikhail Gorbachev made his historic speech at the United Nations General Assembly, the main point of his speech was a refusal from class struggle as the main principle of the Soviet international policy, emphasize priority of general human values over narrow state interest and unilateral reduction of Soviet military forces.

On February 7, 1990, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union agreed to give up its monopoly of power. Over the next several weeks, the 15 constituent republics of the USSR held their first competitive elections. Reformers and ethnic nationalists won many of the seats. Faced with growing republic separatism, Gorbachev attempted to restructure the Soviet Union into a less centralized state. On August 20, 1991, the Russian SFSR was scheduled to sign the New Union Treaty, which was to convert the Soviet Union into a federation of independent republics with a common president, foreign policy and military. This meant the preservation of the Communist Party control over economy and social life.

A failed coup by Communist hard-liners against Gorbachev in August 1991 discredited the Communist Party and greatly hastened its decline. Though the autumn of 1991, the Russian government took over the union government, ministry by ministry. In November 1991, Yeltsin issued a decree banning the CPSU throughout the Russian republic. As a result, many former party bureaucrats abandoned the Communist Party in favor of positions in new government structures.

Russia and the other Soviet successor states have faced a chaotic and harsh transition from a command economy to free-market capitalism following the collapse of the Soviet Union. A large percentage of the population currently lives in poverty, which was largely nonexistent in the last decades of the Soviet Union. Living conditions have also declined in other parts of the former Eastern bloc. In addition, the poverty and desperation of the Russians and Ukrainians post-Cold War have led to the sale of many advanced Cold War-developed weapons systems, especially very capable modern upgraded versions, around the globe.

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References and Further Reading


