

The Collapse of a Communist Giant: A Comparative Study of Party Unity in Post-Communist
China and the USSR

Research Question and Hypothesis

China and the USSR offer unique evolutions of Marxist-Leninist ideologies, and this transformation coupled with the party leaders' politics and decisions affect communism's perpetuity and dominance in the state. These two communist giants have very similar origins in which both were territorially expansive, populous, agrarian states with a high concentration of power in the small bureaucratic elite and aristocracy. The Russian Revolutions and the Chinese Communist Revolution feature the working class overthrowing the elite, a social phenomenon Marx predicted and the working class people embraced. The new Chinese communist state initially closely modeled its state/party organization on the Bolshevik model, and both states originally shared a similar method of rapid modernization via heavy industry. Despite its homologous beginning, the CCP in the 1970s departed from its own militaristic, Maoist thought creating a dominant alternate ideology in opposition to the Soviet model on the global stage. Thus, the party leadership within the Soviet and Chinese communist poles responded to extrinsic factors such as social movements, political crises as well as economic pressures in markedly different fashions. Both states featured a transition to oligarchic rule in the 1970s with relatively stable party unity; however, in the 1980s, both parties endure events and circumstances threatening to party unity leading to the fall of the Soviet system.³ It is in this context in which we can view one of the most unexpected and expeditious transformations experienced in the twentieth century—the collapse of Soviet Communism. Although the Soviet state under Gorbachev's rule was undergoing some economic stagnation, political discourse and social

pressures, the drastic overhaul of the communist system took the USSR and the world by surprise. This thesis seeks to discover how influencing social, political and economic factors affected Party unity and led to the decision to dismantle the Soviet system. Given the integral role of party unity to the survival of communist states, I hypothesize that the Soviet Communist Party, and by extension the USSR, underwent rapid and unexpected disassembly due to various economic, social and political pressures that weakened party unity. It is important to conduct research from the perspective of party unity in these Communist states as the concentration of decision-making power rests in the hands of the elite party members, including the ability to peacefully dissolve the party state. Additionally, many political and social scientists have viewed that “the totalitarian party is coterminous with the state itself.” Several prevailing theories as discussed thoroughly in the literature review below view different social, political and economic factors as the key reason for the collapse of Soviet communism, but I argue that these factors alone did not cause this dramatic transformation. Instead, we should examine why and if exogenous factors irreparably splintered party unity, therefore, leading to the abrupt fall of the USSR.

Literature Review

There is widespread contention regarding the prevailing factor in the fall of Soviet communism, especially given that it was impossible to predict. In the political sphere, Mayer disagrees with Kotz and Weir, who assert that the Soviet system collapsed due to the desertion of a large number of the political elite, and instead argues that they have reversed causation. He tries to explain the fall of the Soviet system from a Marxist-inspired class-dynamics approach. Another potential political factor of the collapse was the loss of political legitimacy as Hough argues. In relation to political legitimacy, Li argues that the communist party’s unity and strength

is dependent upon the geopolitical theory, and that given the war with Afghanistan, the Cold War, and other related issues, the high geopolitical strain led to its fall. Finally, in the realm of political theories, there will be an examination of the August Coup of 1991 to consider if it was indeed the “straw that broke the camel’s back.”

In the economic sphere, Åslund attempts to account for the collapse due to economic crises and the transformation into a market economy. In a similar vein, Janos justifies the disassembly due to the so-called “Soviet Paradox” and the political repercussions that arose from the economic structural changes. Arnason argues that because communism and modernization are conflicting phenomena, the resultant structural weakness hindered the CPSU’s ability to manage the economic crisis, and thus led to its demise. This paper will conduct a study effects of Gorbachev’s implementation of the perestroika and glasnost reforms in the face of economic and political crisis. In regards to the weakness economic structure, Arnason argues that they alone can not account for the fall of the Soviet system due to their presence in all communist systems, but that it is important to understand how historical conditions aggravated these structural issues.

Finally, in the social realm, this paper will view the effects of Institutional Amphibiousness and increased social mobility due to liberal reforms on party unity and strength. Ding argues that institutional amphibiousness is a source of democratic movements and counter-elite movements that can threaten the communist regimes. In addition to these theories, this paper will also examine the democratic movements of 1989 and other social movements and their potential effect on state legitimacy and unity.

Methodology

I will examine the various political, economic, and social theories as aforementioned in the literature review to determine if and why they affected the CPSU's unity. To strengthen this study, this paper will view the CPSU in comparison to the CCP's unity to determine if circumstances were present in either cases and the extent to which they affected party unity. The parameters of this comparative study will span the years 1978 to 1991 and review the late Brezhnev Administration through Gorbachev's Administration in the Soviet Union and Deng Xiaoping's Rule in China. The causing agents in the theoretical explanations for the fall of the Soviet system will serve as independent variables and party unity will serve as the dependent variable. I will categorize the independent variables' effect on the dependent variable in terms of null effect, weak negative effect and strong negative effect on party unity.

Chapter Outline

In the first chapter, I will examine the political theories including the Geopolitical Theory, Class Dynamics Theory, loss of political legitimacy, elite defection, and the August 1991 Coup to determine if and why there were potential effects on party unity and strength. In the second chapter, I will focus on economic theories and evaluate the Modernization Theory, the economic repercussions of the Soviet-Afgani war, as well as the consequences of the perestroika and glasnost reforms to determine why these factors may affect the CPSU. Finally the third chapter will view why the social theories of Institutional Amphibiousness, Democratic Movements, Nationalist Disintegration, and similar social opposition movements could explain weaker party unity and lead to the disintegration of the USSR.

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I will determine other primary sources soon, I am just working through what exactly is most apt to analyze for this thesis.

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