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The customary long line of people waiting to visit Lenin's remains in his mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square was absent Thursday.

Soviet System Was Eroded From Within

'Onslaught of Common Sense' Ends Bolsheviks' Historic Experiment

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, Dec. 28—As the once monolithic facade of Soviet Communism crumbled to the ground earlier this week, Yevgeni Ivanov decided to pay a final pilgrimage to the Lenin mausoleum, the temple of an ideology that cast its shadow over the entire 20th century.

What used to be the longest line in Moscow has now become the shortest. Even more astonishing was the sudden lack of reverence toward Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, a man who was endowed with almost godlike status by three generations of Soviet citizens.

As the line swept around Lenin's pickled remains, the representatives of *Homo*

Sovieticus began muttering to one another, exchanging sarcastic remarks about the corpse's waxlike appearance. Once grim-faced soldiers, who acted as guardians of the cult, cracked a smile.

"When I was last here 15 years ago, I felt a kind of religious awe at being in Lenin's presence," said Ivanov, an engineer from Donetsk, in eastern Ukraine. "But there's nothing left to believe in anymore. It's all over."

"Dead people should be buried in the ground," agreed Igor Letskovich, a factory worker from the northern Russia town of Norilsk, above the Arctic Circle. "The only reason I came here today was curiosity. I had time to kill before my train leaves."

Ever since it was constructed in August 1924, seven months after Lenin's death,

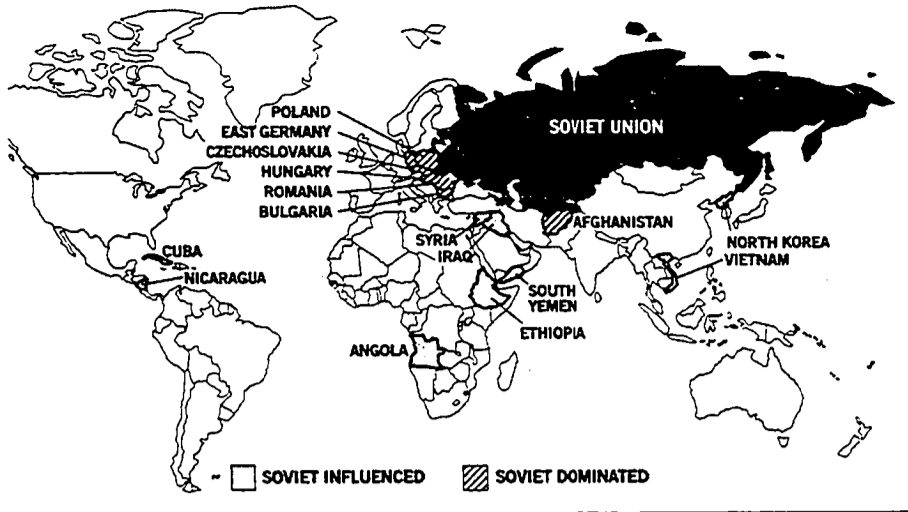
the granite mausoleum in Red Square has served as the focal point of the worldwide Communist movement. It provided the ceremonial backdrop for a totalitarian system that sought to realize the dream of a fairer, more just society through terror, organized lies and state ownership of all property. It was also the podium from which Soviet leaders would review the massive military might of the world's second superpower.

This was the week that the 69-year-old Soviet state formally ceased to exist. The speed of events stunned a world that had long had difficulty recognizing the rotteness of communism's internal structures behind the apparent solidity of its facade. But at the heart of the empire, the dom-

See SOVIET, A26, Col. 1

Time line shows key events
in Soviet history
from 1917 to 1991:

SOVIET UNION AND ITS REACH: 1988

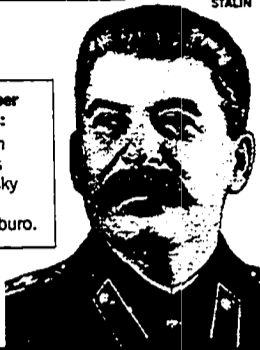


March 1917:
Czar Nicholas II
overthrown.

December
1922:
Soviet
Union
established.

January 1924: Lenin dies.

October
1926:
Stalin
ousts
Trotsky
from
Politburo.



August 1939:
Nonaggression
treaty signed
with Nazi
Germany.

June 1941:
Hitler invades
Soviet Union.

May 1945:
Allies win
World War II
in Europe.

June 1948:
Soviets begin blockade
of West Berlin.

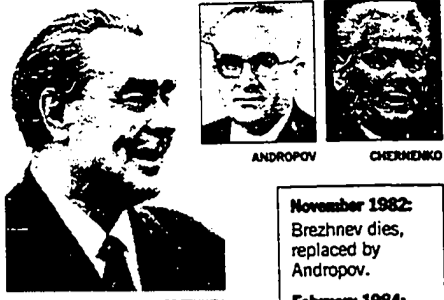
March 1953:
Stalin dies.

February 1956:
Khrushchev denounces
Stalin at party congress.

November 1956:
Red Army crushes
Hungarian revolt.

October 1962:
Khrushchev
withdraws
missiles from
Cuba.

October 1964:
Khrushchev
replaced by
Brezhnev in
Politburo coup.



August 1968:
Warsaw Pact troops
invade Czechoslovakia.

December 1979:
Soviet troops flow into
Afghanistan.

November 1982:
Brezhnev dies,
replaced by
Andropov.

February 1984:
Andropov dies,
replaced by
Chernenko.

March 1985:
Chernenko dies,
replaced by
Gorbachev.



August 1991:
Coup against Gorbachev fails.

December 1991:
Soviet Union replaced by Commonwealth of
Independent States.

Speedy End Belies Durability of Communist Experiment

inant mood was one of enormous anticlimax. The collapse of the facade only confirmed what everybody here already knew.

In the end, it took surprisingly little effort to destroy the system created by Lenin and Joseph Stalin. The comic opera coup by hard-line Communists last August knocked the fight out of the party that fought so ruthlessly, first to grab power and then to retain it. A few decrees signed by Russian President Boris Yeltsin were sufficient to complete the destruction of the Soviet Union and to seize control over the Kremlin in the name of the 1,000-year-old Russian state.

"Out of 18 million Soviet Communists, not a single one raised a finger to save the party when the end came. It took just 10 policemen and 10 kilos of stamped paper to take over the headquarters of the Communist Party. That shows you how rotten the system was," said Lev Rozgon, a writer who spent 17 years in Stalin's gulags, or prison camps.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of the Communist experiment is not that it collapsed so quickly, but that it lasted so long. Historians will have to explain how a small band of revolutionaries with no previous experience of government succeeded in creating a state that dominated half the world. The great historical detour that began in 1917 in St. Petersburg is only now beginning to run its course and will affect the lives of many future generations.

"The Bolsheviks thought they could deceive God," said Lev Timofeyev, a former journalist and human rights activist. "They thought they could build an economy that would function without money and without markets. We are now seeing the result. At one point, they even tried to abolish the family, making people live in communal hostels. But people did not want to live like that; they preferred living in their separate rooms. The Bolsheviks also tried to abolish religion, with the result that 80 percent of the people in this country are now believers."

The durability of communism and the speed with which it collapsed are two sides of the same coin. There came a point at which the strengths of the system—massive repression, rigid centralization, an all-embracing ideology, the obsession with military power—turned into fatal weaknesses.

"The collapse of communism is the result of a long process of its own internal erosion—erosion of ideology, of the economy, of political power itself," said Fyodor Burlatsky, a former aide to reformist Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. "The erosion started after Stalin's death in 1953. By the time [Mikhail] Gorbachev came to power, we had simply ceased to believe in communism. The entire post-Stalin era was a preparation for the destruction of the system. It was not efficient, it was cruel, and it could not compete with modern, Western civilization."

Communists Pursued Imperial Goals

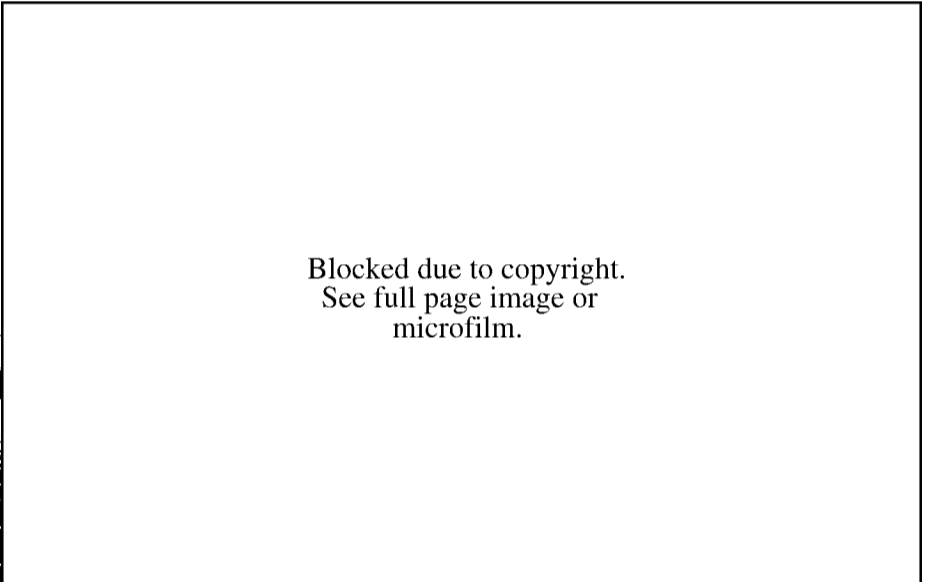
During his travels around the gulags, Rozgon met a general who had served under Czar Nicholas II, murdered by the Bolsheviks in 1918. Despite his incarceration in a prison camp, the general turned out to be an enthusiastic supporter of the new regime. He had come to the conclusion that only the Communists possessed the ruthlessness needed to preserve the old Russian empire. He dreamed of Stalin founding a new dynasty.

"The Communists pursued the same geopolitical goals as the czars. That's why they were able to remain in power for so long," said Rozgon. "Stalin expanded the influence of the czarist empire far beyond its original boundaries. The communist idea was an imperialist idea, based on a system of unprecedented repression. The czars abolished serfdom in 1861, but it was a childish game compared with the system of slave labor that Stalin introduced."

"The Bolsheviks continued the tradition of Russian superpower nationalism," agreed Burlatsky. "Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, [Leonid] Brezhnev—they all behaved like some new kind of czar. The old aristocracy was replaced by a Communist Party elite, which did not allow any other elite to compete with it. The new regime suited the patriarchal, authoritarian character of the Russian people."

Soon after seizing power in St. Petersburg in November 1917, the Communists shifted the capital of Soviet Russia back to Moscow. The move was probably made for security reasons—the German army was advancing—but it turned out to be deeply symbolic. By abandoning the graceful neoclassical city built by Peter the Great as a "window on Europe," the Bolsheviks were returning to the Asiatic sources of czarist autocracy.

At first, the new Communist regime seemed very weak. Neither Lenin nor any of his closest associates expected it to survive for very long; their main concern was establishing a myth that would go down in history,



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rather like the Paris Commune of 1871. Western governments were similarly short-sighted. The Germans, who could have toppled Lenin overnight, allowed him to remain in power in return for pulling Russia out of World War I.

"The Bolsheviks were lucky because they came to power during a deep crisis for Western civilization. The West lacked politicians of the Reagan type. They completely underestimated the Communist threat," said Alexander Tsipko, a Marxist philosopher who worked for a time in the central party bureaucracy. "The Bolsheviks then did something that even Hitler was unable to achieve. Hitler became a hero by suppressing and exterminating conquered nations. But nobody in history has ever resorted to such terrible violence against their own people as the Bolsheviks."

Debate still rages here about the number of Soviet citizens who were killed by the Bolsheviks during Lenin's Red Terror of 1919-20, Stalin's collectivization campaign of the early 1930s and the great purge of 1937. There was a net population loss of about 8 million people between 1932 and 1933, as a result of a forced famine. Marxist historian Roy Medvedev estimates the total number of Stalin's victims at between 30 million and 40 million, including 5 million to 7 million people sent to camps for "counterrevolutionary activities" during the purges.

"For Stalin, personal security and the security of the state [were] one and the same thing," said historian Anton Antonov-Ovseenko, the son of the Bolshevik who led the attack on the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg in 1917. "The Bolsheviks created a system that excluded all possibility not only of mutiny but even the thought of mutiny. That's why Stalin created the cult of his own personality. He created the illusion that he was the state. An attack on him meant an attack on the state and the party."

"The year 1937 lived on not only in history and the pages of books but in the very genes of our people. People are easily frightened and scared," said former Soviet foreign minister Alexander Bessmertnykh, who was himself dismissed after the August coup for failing to publicly denounce the plotters.

But the Stalinist system rested on something more than naked terror. It also depended on the ability of the Bolsheviks to persuade millions of people that they were building a wonderful new society, free of exploitation and want.

"Communism was a very powerful ideology because it rested on illusions that had accumulated over many centuries. The Bolsheviks talked about the happiness of mankind, the building of God's kingdom on our planet. It was an ideology that made fanatics out of politicians and warriors out of common people," said Timofeyev, who was jailed under Brezhnev because of his dissident views.

Voice of Big Brother Recants

For the best part of two decades, Igor Kirillov served as the voice and face of Big Brother. As senior anchor for Soviet central television, he was the means by which the Kremlin communicated its pronouncements to the outside world. For millions of Soviet citizens, he was the personification of an anonymous and seemingly immutable system. He is now a deeply disillusioned man.

"I was born in this system. Like everybody else, I thought it was the best system in the world. This was

something we imbibed from birth, along with our mothers' milk," said Kirillov, who was born in 1932, a year after Yeltsin and Gorbachev. "Only now do I understand that my whole life was devoted to serving a cruel and useless system."

Kirillov's transformation from Kremlin spokesman to free thinker is symbolic of an intellectual journey undertaken by an entire generation of Soviet people. It is remarkable only because it was played out on a vast stage under the glare of the television cameras. When the previously stiff anchor appeared on the popular youth program "Vzglyad" in a sweater in 1989 and announced that he had been living a lie, the psychological impact was devastating.

Kirillov's conversion took place gradually, over a period of many years. Until the early 1970s, he was a true believer. He still speaks glowingly about the 22nd Communist Party Congress in 1961, when Khrushchev announced that a fully egalitarian Communist society would be achieved within the lifetime of the "present generation of Soviet people."

"As Khrushchev spoke those words, the sun came out—and the entire Congress hall seemed to light up," recalled Kirillov. "See, we told each other, even nature believes in our cause. That's when my wife and I decided to have our first daughter. We hoped that she would live under communism."

Under Khrushchev, Kirillov learned about the camps, Stalin's crimes, the fact that many millions of people had died. But the system of double-think was deeply ingrained. Real doubts only began setting in during the mid-1970s, with the growth of the absurd personality cult surrounding Brezhnev. The Brezhnev era was a period of general cynicism, in which Soviets said one thing in public and something entirely different in the privacy of their kitchens. They had ceased to believe in the communist system—but were prepared to maintain the fiction of belief in their outward lives.

"In order to seem sincere in front of a television camera, you have to believe in what you are saying. Therefore, I had to convince myself that I really did believe. This is what is known as the Stanislavsky school of acting. I tried to make the pronouncements of the leadership explicable and convincing to ordinary people," said Kirillov, who was awarded the Lenin state prize and the title "People's Artist" for his efforts.

When describing the triumphs of socialism, Kirillov's voice dripped with treacherous pride. His face would light up as he announced the fulfillment and over-fulfillment of five-year plans. Turgid speeches by Brezhnev were treated as if they were the distillation of all human wisdom, self-evident truths with which no honest person could possibly argue. Turning to news from the capitalist countries—unemployment and crime were the favorite topics—Kirillov would switch instantly to a tone of high moral indignation.

"The system survived so long thanks to the work of the ideological service of the Communist Party and television. It was a kind of mass hypnosis," said Kirillov. "They chose me as their spokesman because I was more convincing."

As a trained actor, Kirillov was a particularly skilled practitioner of the art of deception. But the double life that he led for so many years is entirely familiar to millions of Soviet citizens. The country became a gigantic theater, in which people mouthed lines that they had

learned by heart. To survive, everybody became masters of the "Stanislavsky school" of acting.

But although propaganda is a very powerful weapon in the hands of the state, it is not by itself sufficient to ensure obedience. It had to be backed up by the collective memory of Stalin's great terror and the constant fear of new arrests.

"All the propaganda and belief in communism made sense only if someone was arrested or at least sent to a madhouse every day. This stage lasted until 1985, when Gorbachev came to power," said Tsipko. "I think that if some psychoanalyst began studying the phenomenon of mass belief in communism, he would find out that it was a substitute for irrational fear."

After Stalin, Seeds of Change

At first, the cruelty of the communist system was at least partly counterbalanced by a sense of national purpose. For all its faults, the command economy did enable the leadership to concentrate the country's vast resources on attaining a few, very specific goals: industrialization, the defeat of Nazi Germany, postwar reconstruction, the race into space and the achievement of strategic parity with the United States.

"Communism was a system for mobilizing the masses. When confronted with a single task, it was able to achieve fantastic results. The Great Patriotic War [World War II] was the ultimate test of the system—and it passed with flying colors," said Alexander Galkin, a leading Russian sociologist. "But after the war, and particularly after Stalin's death, the system began to exhaust itself."

"You should bear in mind that, for all the drawbacks and crimes of the Stalinist regime, it did produce a decent living for masses of people. By Western standards, of course, it was not a rich life. But at least people felt secure and they had their jobs," said Georgi Shakhnazarov, a political scientist and one of Gorbachev's key advisers.

As the country opened up to the outside world, it became more and more difficult to sustain the pretense that life in the Soviet Union was better than anywhere else. Rigid censorship and restrictions on foreign travel were sufficient to hoodwink ordinary people. But the party elite traveled abroad or listened to foreign radio stations—and were startled by what they found. Gorbachev himself made several long visits to France and Italy during these years.

"When I went abroad for the first time, I was surprised to find that capitalist society was flourishing. I expected to see poor people and unemployed on every corner," said Bessmertnykh, who worked in the Soviet Embassy in Washington in the 1960s and early 1970s. "This was the time we started to think about the need to change our country. The idea never left us, even though the political conditions were quite unfavorable."

The cynicism of the Brezhnev era—the so-called "Era of Stagnation"—was the indispensable precursor for the eventual overthrow of the communist system. Outwardly, everything seemed stable. Inwardly, the entire system was beginning to collapse under what Timofeyev calls "the onslaught of common sense."

"The shadow economy grew to huge proportions under Brezhnev. We have a Russian word *tolkach* [literally "pusher" or "fixer"], the man who knows which official to bribe, how to fix a hotel room, where to find a girl. The *tolkach* became the most important figure in the socialist economy," said Timofeyev.

By the time Gorbachev came to power in 1985, the intellectual ground was well prepared for major reform. Shortly before his election as general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, Gorbachev recalls taking a walk with his friend Eduard Shevardnadze along the beach at Pitsunda on the Black Sea. "We cannot go on living like this," he told his future foreign minister, who wholeheartedly agreed.

Initially, Gorbachev and his team wanted to reform communism, not to bury it. But the more they tinkered with the system, the more they discovered it was impossible to save it. "It was a vicious circle," said Shakhnazarov. "Before making economic changes, it was necessary to change the political system. But when Gorbachev started changing the political system, he released nationalistic forces, which in turn led to economic decline."

In the end, the Bolsheviks wrote their own death warrant. By ruthlessly suppressing all manifestations of nationalism and political dissent, they created the preconditions for the simultaneous collapse of communism and the Soviet state seven decades later. When the end came, no one was prepared to help them.

"Soviet power was based on lies and violence. The whip had to be used continuously and it had to be backed up with lies. As soon as our leaders stopped using the whip, the system began to fall apart. After Gorbachev introduced *glasnost* [openness], and the lies diminished, communism was doomed," said Rozgon, the camp survivor. "The Soviet state never received the loyalty and support of its citizens."