

FALL OF THE SOVIET UNION

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

In one corner: Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev, who was trying to drag the U.S.S.R. out from behind the Iron Curtain using the twin strategies of perestroika (“restructuring”) and glasnost (“openness”). In the other corner: Soviet hardliners who were clinging to a failed system of government. The battle went down 35 years ago.

THE COUP ATTEMPT

AUG. 4, 1991

Mikhail Gorbachev is in the process of finalizing what’s called the Union Treaty, which will loosen control the U.S.S.R. has over its member republics and decentralize government. It’s just the latest — and perhaps the largest — step in peeling back the Iron Curtain.

An exhausted Gorbachev leaves Moscow with his family and heads to their vacation villa on the shore of the Black Sea.



AUG. 18

Defense Minister Dmitry Yazov, Vice President Gennady Yanayev and the heads of the Interior Ministry and the KGB visit Gorbachev and demand he either kill the treaty or resign as leader of the Soviet Union.

Gorbachev defiantly refuses and warns his family there may be consequences. The Gorbachev family is placed under armed guard and its communications are cut off.

AUG. 19

The leaders of the coup announce to the public that Gorbachev has been relieved of his duties for health reasons.

The president of the Russian Republic — former Gorbachev protégé Boris Yeltsin — denounces the coup as a “new reign of terror” and calls for all Russian citizens to leave their jobs and to protest in the streets.



A crowd begins to gather outside the Russian parliament building. Yeltsin climbs atop a tank and urges citizens to resist. Later that day, the deputy mayor of Moscow joins in the resistance.

Unbelievably, the leaders of the coup have failed to seize control of the state-controlled TV station. That evening, video is broadcast of Yeltsin’s speech. He becomes a hero overnight.

AUG. 20

Tensions remain high. Yeltsin calls President George H.W. Bush, who assures him the U.S. will not recognize the coup government.

The Soviet Army, under control of the new government, prepares for an assault on the center of Moscow.

Protesters dig in for the attack they know will be coming soon.

AUG. 21

Not long after midnight, the assault begins. A column of military vehicles breaks through barricades set up around the parliament building. In the confusion, two protesters are shot dead and a third is crushed under a tank.

Protesters rush the vehicles. The armed personnel carrier is set afire. Young soldiers — unhappy about being ordered to assault their friends and neighbors — break off the attack. It’s clear the coup has failed.

When daylight arrives, the “gang of eight” coup leaders are arrested. A large statue of the founder of the KGB in front of KGB headquarters is toppled.

A crowd lingers on the streets of Moscow and chants for its new champion: “Yeltsin! Yeltsin!”

Gorbachev is released from house arrest and returns to Moscow, but it’s clear his role in the reformation of the Soviet Union is done.



THE BIGGER PICTURE

1985 MARCH 11

Gorbachev is elected general secretary of the Communist Party. He is the fourth new Soviet leader in just over two years. The next month, the party adopts Gorbachev’s platform of moderate reform.

1987 JUNE

The Central Committee approves Gorbachev’s economic reform plan that defines profit as the driving economic force.

OCT. 21

In a closed meeting of the Central Committee, Boris Yeltsin accuses Gorbachev of moving too slowly on economic reform. Yeltsin is dismissed from the Politburo.

DEC. 19

Gorbachev frees human rights activist Andrei Sakharov from internal exile in Gorky.

1988 JUNE 28

Gorbachev closes the 19th Communist Party Conference with a call for the creation of a new parliament, a strengthened presidency and a market economy, and consideration of allowing republics greater control of economic affairs.

1989 MARCH

The new Congress of People’s Deputies is elected. Its opening session is characterized by open political debate.

AUGUST-DECEMBER

Communist governments throughout Eastern Europe fall after Gorbachev says he will not use force to save them. On Nov. 9, East Germany opens the gates in the Berlin Wall.

1990 MARCH 11

Lithuania declares its independence. Its Baltic neighbors, Latvia and Estonia, follow suit.

MAY 29

The new Russian republic elects Yeltsin president and declares “sovereignty,” claiming control of its natural resources. By year’s end, 15 Soviet republics declare some degree of sovereignty.

JULY

Conservatives criticize Gorbachev at the 28th Communist Party Congress. Yeltsin and other radicals quit the party. Gorbachev purges several old guard members from the Politburo.

1991 JAN. 13

Fourteen people are killed when Soviet tanks attack a main television tower in Vilnius, Lithuania. Moscow News proclaims “Perestroika Is Over.”

FEB. 19

Yeltsin accuses Gorbachev of pushing the country to dictatorship and demands his resignation.

MARCH 17

Gorbachev’s Union Treaty, which gives greater power to the republics, wins approval in a nationwide referendum.

JULY 1

Former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and six other prominent Soviet reformers agree to create a new national political party aimed at rivaling the Communists.

JULY 26

Communist leaders overwhelmingly approve Gorbachev’s new party platform, abandoning decades of Marxist dogma

AUG. 16

Alexander Yakovlev, once Gorbachev’s top adviser, quits the party, warning of a coup by “Stalinists.”

AUG. 18-21

Hardliners attempt to derail reform by placing Gorbachev under house arrest and seizing control of the government. The coup fails.

SEPTEMBER

The Congress of People’s Deputies votes for dissolution of the Soviet Union.

DEC. 25

Gorbachev resigns as Soviet president. The U.S. recognizes the independence of the remaining Soviet republics.