

19

AFTER THE COLD WAR

The break-up of the Soviet Union

Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union had been a single country consisting of 15 republics, the largest and most powerful of which was Russia. When the satellite states of Eastern Europe started to break away from Soviet control, some of these republics also began to demand their freedom. At the same time, Gorbachev was pushing ahead with his perestroika reform programme. However, the restructuring of the economy was far from easy, and the reforms created more problems than they solved. Inflation and unemployment rose rapidly.

Events came to a head when old-style communists who opposed Gorbachev tried to overthrow him in a coup in 1991. The coup failed and its leaders were arrested. In the chaos that followed, the Communist Party was suspended and, one by one, the republics declared their independence from the communist-run Soviet Union (see picture below). At the end of the year the Soviet Union ceased to exist, and 15 independent nations were left in its place.

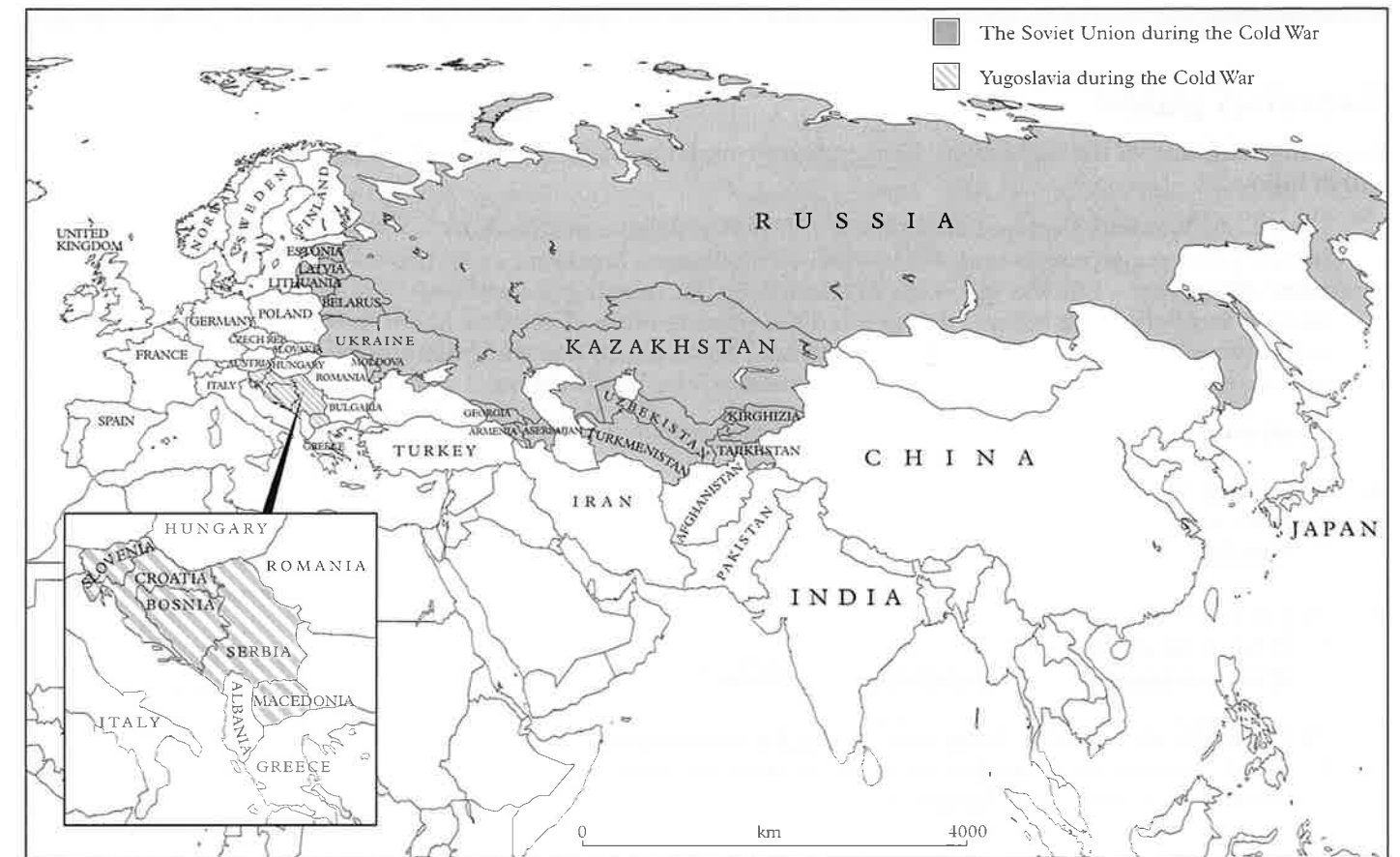
Free from communist rule, the people of the new nations had greater freedom than before – especially the right of free speech and the right to elect their governments. But there was no end to their economic problems. Without Soviet central control of industry, trade and transport, prices rose alarmingly while wages remained level. People's savings became worthless, and living standards dropped.

Conflict in the new nations

Communist rule had kept the lid on many old quarrels. Without it, those quarrels flared up in many of the new nations (see map). The most serious flare-up was in Yugoslavia. Like the Soviet Union, this was a union of republics whose people belonged to different ethnic groups and had different religions. For more than 40 years they had been held together by a communist dictatorship which allowed them little freedom.

Communist control collapsed in 1990 when elections were held for new governments in each republic. One by one, these new governments declared their independence from Yugoslavia. But one of them, the Serbian government, opposed this. Serbia had been the most powerful republic in Yugoslavia and its communist leaders wanted it to stay that way. Moreover, in two of the republics which declared independence, there were large numbers of Serbs who wanted to be under Serbian rule. In Croatia, this led to a violent civil war (1991–2) in which thousands were killed as Serbs fought to take land from the Croats. In 1992 a similar war began in Bosnia, with Muslims fighting Serbs. Among the horrors of this war was the 'ethnic cleansing' of Muslim areas.

Yugoslavia was not the only country to break up as a result of the collapse of communism. In 1993 Czechoslovakia separated into two new states, the



Europe and Asia after the Cold War

Czech Republic and Slovakia. Two countries, however, went in the opposite direction. In October 1990, East Germany and West Germany were reunited as a single country.

Disarmament

One of the first results of the end of the Cold War was a reduction in arms. The USA and Soviet Union signed the INF Treaty in 1987 (see page 42). In 1991, they went even further and signed START (Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty), eliminating 5000 Soviet and 3500 American nuclear warheads. A START 2 Treaty in 1992 began further reductions with the aim of reducing each side's total of warheads to 3000 by the year 2003.

These were welcome moves, but they did not mean that there was an end in sight to nuclear weapons. In 1992, there were still 6600 warheads on long-range missiles in former Soviet territory. More

worryingly, now that the Soviet Union had broken up, these were owned by the countries in which they were based – Kazakhstan, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia – so there were now more armies with nuclear weapons in the world than ever before.

The 'peace dividend'?

As the number of missiles fell as a result of the INF and START treaties, people in the West looked forward to a 'peace dividend'. By this, they meant that the money saved by reduced arms spending would allow more to be spent on social needs such as health care, education etc. But the end of the Cold War coincided in the West with the start of an economic recession. In both Europe and the United States, trade slumped, factories closed and unemployment rose during the early 1990s. Much of the peace dividend was swallowed up by increased spending on unemployment pay.

This photograph was taken on 24 August 1991, the day after communists tried, and failed, to overthrow the Soviet leader, Gorbachev, in a coup. It shows the statue of Lenin, leader of the 1917 Communist Revolution and first leader of the Soviet Union, being removed from its place in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania.



Questions

- A. Some Americans claimed in the 1990s that they had destroyed Communism and 'won the Cold War'. Which developments after 1989 can be used to (1) support, (2) disagree with the view that the United States won the Cold War?
- B. Many people in the West believed that the collapse of Communism in 1989–91 was a good thing.
 1. What benefits resulted from the collapse of Communism?
 2. What disadvantages resulted from the collapse of Communism?
 3. Explain which you think were greater: the benefits or the disadvantages.