Russia Essay, Research Paper

Modern Russia s ever-changing political system and transitional periods have made it an interesting place to be. Russia has gone through many political challenges and changing agendas in its time. The state has gone from the Soviet Union, or the U.S.S.R., to today s Russia, or Russian Federation, in under one century. The government that was once communist is now semi-presidential, and with the hope of the United States will soon become a completely democratic state. In each form of government Russia has had its fair share of leaders. From the Bolsheviks came Vladimir Lenin with his democratic elements, then Joseph Stalin succeeding him and erasing any notion of democracy from the state. Mikhail Gorbachev followed them, leading the Communist Party into yet another reign, revamping the economic system of Mother Russia with his perestroika. Next, Russia s leader became Boris Yeltsin, who brought an end to the Soviet Union, creating the Russian Federation and its first multi-party system. Finally, today there is Vladimir Putin, former KGB leader and present advocate of democracy. All of these leaders are ingrained in the memories and history of the Russian people. On May Day 2001, they rallied for their leaders, remembering how their life was not as bad as is the utter confusion of today. Today s struggles motivate the people to show great nostalgia for the communist days of the past.

From 1917 to 1991, a great deal went on in the Soviet Union s political system. During most of this time, the state was entirely under the totalitarian rule of the Communist Party. Although they had seven decades of industrial control in the Soviet, fewer than ten percent actually joined the communists; unable to believe in the utopia they talked of. Totalitarianism is made up of a single dominant party with a utopian ideology. The state maintains control over all organized activity, both public and private, and makes mobilized participation mandatory. All of this state repression guarantees fear embedded in its citizens. In short, totalitarianism is ruling by fear and arbitrary terror. Politically, the Soviet Union was a party-state. Here all the members and the institutions of the state composed the U.S.S.R. They were all members of the same totalitarian party, and the leader makes up the entire party. The leader makes all the decisions and henceforth is the state itself. Under Stalin, from 1929-1953, the word totalitarian was made synonymous with the Soviet, and thusly Stalin too. Before taking office in 1929, Stalin made sure all opposition was eradicated. What taste of democracy Lenin gave to the Russian people was swiftly taken away with his death and Stalin s emergence on the political front. The reasoning for this was to insure all class gaps were closed; Communism takes care of that. His way of governing was comfortable and familiar to the people. What made Stalin happy made them happy. Although ultimately Stalin just craved political control, the good citizens of the Soviet Union were not going to be the ones to stop him.

Gorbachev took power as the Communist Party leader in 1985, post-Stalin, after a few unsuccessful attempts by others at de-Stalinizing the Soviet. Nikita Khrushchev, the first post-Stalin leader in 1955 only reinforced the values of Stalin in creating the KGB, or secret police of the Soviet. The KGB initiated a reign of terror, subordinating the Communist Party. They were there to protect the interests of the Soviet state, eliminating any party opposition or potential uprisings by anyone. With Gorbachev came new reform efforts and political renewal with the same communistic ideologies as there ever was. His introduction of glasnost, or openness, involved relaxing controls on the public actions, and demokratizatsiia, or democracy, was an effort to increase the responsiveness of political organs to public sentiment (Kessleman 435), in and outside party lines. Freer political expression was allowed with these reforms that both changed and challenged the traditional Soviet political system. Unfortunately, this stream of change threatened to destroy the Soviet and when the people began a rebellion against their leader to stop its demise, Gorbachev was forced out of office. Later that year, Yeltsin came to power, declaring himself the true champion of democratic values and Russian national interest (Kessleman 436), and with his rise came the collapse of the Soviet Union, putting an end to Stalinist ways. Yeltsin united Russia with Ukraine and Belarus, then Belorussia, to form the Russian Federation, one independent country. He then routed Russia on to democratization, declaring his role as the president.

In 1917, when the Bolsheviks took power of the Soviet, Lenin declared all people were to share everything. Prior to 1924, Lenin allowed market free trade, working nicely for the citizens. Sadly, all capitalistic activity was ended with Lenin s death. Stalin was the architect of the Soviet economic system. His immediate goal for the state was rapid industrialization in ten years or less, or economic failure would be inevitable. In the early twentieth century, heavy industry was everything to a state s economy. In 1930, Stalin promoted a propaganda film aimed at motivating workers to sacrifice them for the Soviet s industrial power. In order to reach his goal, Stalin proposed what he called a centrally planned economic system. Unlike the market economy of the United States, in this method there is no supply and demand feature, no consumer sovereignty, no administrative guidance, and no freedom. The state owns everything, setting the prices, and the planner determines what products are available to the people. This fiscal method gave Stalin complete control over the people and production of the Soviet. When Stalin came to power, eighty percent of the people were peasants who lived in the rural areas of the U.S.S.R. When Stalin realized the peasants owned property that did not support his centrally planned economy, he created the method of collective agriculture. This reform tragically affected the peasants. Their land was confiscated by the state, giving it to the entire village as a whole and requiring everyone there to work on it to produce a quota of products for Stalin. These products were then sold back to the state at low prices set by Stalin. Anyone who was remotely capitalistic or did not comply with Stalin s way of life he had set for his people was considered a class enemy and henceforth purged. Twenty million kulaks ( rich peasants) were exiled or killed, along with fifty percent of the military and sixty percent of bureaucrats in the four years of 1929-1933. Stalin s centrally planned economy weighed heavily on the people of the U.S.S.R. but it was communism and that was all they knew.

For his great addition to the Soviet economy, Gorbachev introduced perestroika, a reform involving decentralization and rationalization of the economic structure to enable individual enterprises to increase efficiency and take initiative (Kessleman 435). Perestroika reformed the centrally planned economic system, but as the reform intensified, the Soviet experienced an economic downturn. The fifteen union republics, each made up of an ethnic or national group, demanded economic autonomy, separating their export track from one another despite the mandates (Kessleman 436). Soon after this problem commenced, Yeltsin stepped in to democratize the new Russian Federation. This boom of introducing the Western market economy only initiated havoc. This, what was known as shock therapy, created corruption and a confusing capitalistic market that left workers without pay for months (Kessleman 438-441). Yeltsin proved it to be very difficult to find a method of government that could handle Russia s troubled economy. The International Monetary Fund, or IMF, loaned Russia money attempting to help her economic situation, but without avail. No more funds could be given out from 1995-1998, decreasing inflation for a year. This bid some time for Russia s monetary system to catch up with itself, although unable to do so. In 1999, depression hit Russia again and anything to avoid taxes and payments was done. Some took their money to foreign banks, such as Germany, to keep it safe and ensure its value, while others were caught up in the mafia s illegal economic network (Kessleman 442). Today, ninety percent of Russia s capitol came from the IMF but with the help of the European Union (EU), there will be enough funds to bring Russia back to that stable, familiar, yet Stalinist level.

To the people of the new Russia, the former communistic government was a lesser evil than the attempt at capitalism. The Western-influenced market economy has brought nothing but failure and frustration to the Russian people. The rallies on May 1, 2001 were advocating for better jobs and better pay for them (May Day). All of this disappointment with the empty promises of a better life for Russia soon, has made the people think of the days when everything was equally good or bad and the decisions were made for them. During the reign of Stalin, everyone was required to work, but everyone had a job, and thusly money coming to them. The society was relatively egalitarian. Everyone s basic needs were met and all basic products were cheap and accessible. In addition, workers had housing assigned to them through their workplace. Overall, there was no risk or insecurity of the market economy. Life was somewhat sublime under Stalin. He kept the economy stable and working. If capitalism could reach this level in Russia, the people could be happy, but until Putin or his successor determines a better way, the people will just have to pray for another dose of communism.

Every Russian leader has been loved and loathed, commended and condemned. Russian citizens know one thing is sure: they all made a difference; they changed lives. The organization of Stalinist Russia is especially missed and it is shown through the protests on May Day. . Although democracy is what Russia has attempted to gradually adopt since Stalin s death, its people today are not ready to take on this system of potential inequality and chaos. They are not ready for extreme poverty levels and other negative issues of democracy. Russia, like any deeply traditional country, is afraid of the unfamiliar.

Works Cited

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May Day Brings Out Thousands. The Moscow Times, May 13, 2001, http://www.moscowtimes.ru/stories/2001/05/07/010.html.