Chapter 1
History of the USSR and CIS

Sheila M. Puffer
Northeastern University, USA

Daniel J. McCarthy
Northeastern University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of the history of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, from the time of its creation as a result of the 1917 Russian Revolution, to its dissolution in 1991. The major emphasis is on economic conditions, with political and social conditions as background. The chapter then discusses The Commonwealth of Independent States, the alliance that included most of the 15 former Soviet republics that became independent countries. Developments in Russia, the largest both geographically and demographically, as well as the most powerful of the CIS countries, are the major focus from 1991 to 2017.

HISTORY OF THE USSR AND CIS

Origins of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

This chapter covers the political and economic environments from the origins of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR or Soviet Union) in the 1920s under the communist regime of Vladimir Lenin to the end of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The chapter then focuses on Russia from 1992 to 2017. That country is the primary successor state of the independent countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that include all of the 15 Soviet republics except for the three Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

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The USSR was created from the Russian Empire of the tsars and eventually came to include 15 republics that were ruled by the Communist Party centrally based in Moscow. In 1917 the tsars were overthrown in the Bolshevik Revolution in St. Petersburg, Russia, led by Marxist revolutionary, Vladimir Lenin. Following a period of civil war, in 1922 Lenin and the communist government formed the USSR by creating four socialist republics from the former Russian empire: the Russian, Transcaucasian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs). The Turkmen and Uzbek SSRs were added in 1924, followed by the Tadzhik SSR in 1929, and the Kazakh and Kirgiz SSRs in 1936, the same year that the Transcaucasian Republic was divided into the Armenian, Azerbaijan, and Georgian SSRs. The USSR was completed in 1940 when the Moldavian, Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian SSRs were added. By 1990, within the 15 republics, the USSR also included 20 autonomous republics (avtonomnye respubliki), eight autonomous provinces (avtonomnye oblasti), 10 autonomous districts (avtonomnye okruga), six regions (kraja), and 114 provinces (oblasti) (McCauley, 2016).

The Soviet Union was by far the world’s largest country in terms of landmass. It was also one of the world’s most diverse nations, having more than 100 nationalities within its borders, although by the late 1980s, two-thirds of the population were of East Slavic ethnicity, comprised of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union was abolished with the August, 1991 coup d’etat. The breakup of the Soviet Union quickly ensued, beginning with the three Baltic republics achieving independence and resuming the sovereign status they held prior to World War II. By the end of 1991, the remaining 12 republics also became independent countries, and formed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Declaration proclaiming interaction based on sovereign equality.

The institutions of the communist period built upon the traditional institutions of earlier years. Traditional Russian society before 1917 was centered around village elders who were entrusted with centralized and virtually unlimited power, but were also expected to represent the will of the people (Klyuchevskiy, 1987). This form of centralized power was also characteristic of clan-type societies such as Kazakhstan (Minbaeva & Muratbekova-Touron, 2013), Ukraine, and Belarus. The tsars centralized power and used whatever means necessary to exercise it over the population, many of whom were serfs who worked the land for landowners, or baryn. Serfdom was abolished in 1861, yet real power remained with the tsars and those loyal to them. By the early twentieth century, the time was ripe for a political, economic, and social revolution, that had its roots in the socialist doctrines of Karl Marx and Frederich Engels that had been sweeping Europe. The Russian revolutionary, Vladimir Lenin, brought those ideas to Russia and the Russian Empire.
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