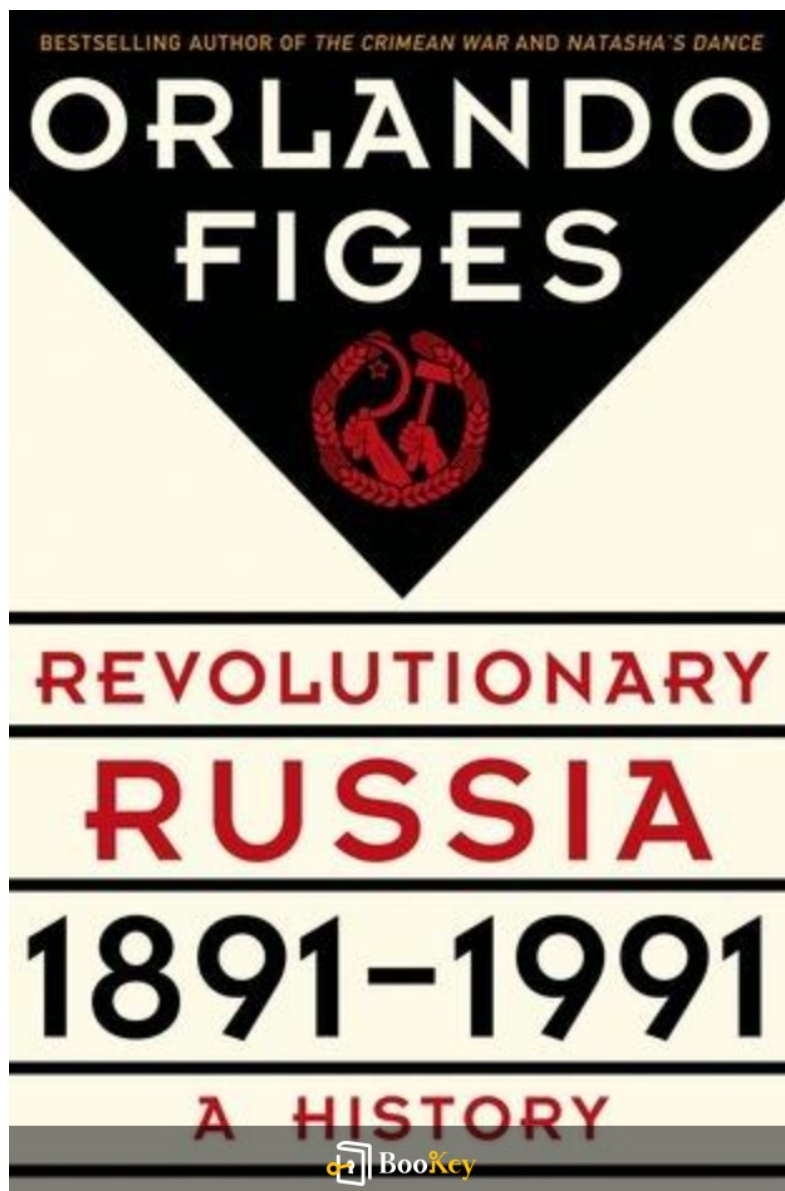


Revolutionary Russia, 1891 - 1991 PDF

Orlando Figes



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About the book

Title: Revolutionary Russia, 1891-1991: A Historical Overview

Author: Orlando Figes

Overview:

In his acclaimed work, **Revolutionary Russia, 1891 - 1991**, historian Orlando Figes presents an in-depth exploration of a century filled with dramatic changes and upheavals in Russian history. The narrative spans from the decline of the Tsarist empire to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, highlighting the pivotal events and ideological struggles that led to profound transformations in Russian society.

Key Themes:

1. **Historical Transformation:** Figes meticulously chronicles the significant shifts that occurred over the century, showcasing how these events altered the landscape of Russian life.
2. **Struggle for Power and Freedom:** The book reflects on the constant battle for authority and the quest for individual liberties amid the turbulence of war and revolution.
3. **Social and Political Forces:** Figes illustrates the complex interplay of various forces—social, political, and economic—that shaped the course of Russian history.

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Narrative Style:

With a blend of scholarly insight and engaging storytelling, Figs not only addresses major historical milestones but also takes a closer look at the personal stories and the lasting impacts they have had on Russia and the global community.

Who Should Read This:

This comprehensive historical account is perfect for history enthusiasts as well as readers who are interested in understanding the dynamics that have influenced modern geopolitics. **Revolutionary Russia, 1891 - 1991** is a compelling and thought-provoking read that illuminates the legacy of a complex era.

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About the author

Profile: Orlando Figes

Name: Orlando Figes

Profession: Historian, Author

Nationality: British

Overview:

Orlando Figes is an acclaimed British historian noted for his significant contributions to the field of Russian history. With a background from Cambridge University, he currently holds the position of Professor of History, where he continues to influence the academic landscape.

Reputation:

Figes has gained a strong reputation for his thorough research and compelling storytelling. His work delves deeply into the intricacies of Russian society, culture, and politics.

Notable Works:

His bibliography includes several highly praised publications, among them:

- *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924*
- *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*

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These works have been widely recognized, receiving numerous awards and being translated into over twenty languages, contributing to his status as a respected global authority on Russian history.

Impact:

Figes has successfully bridged scholarly insights with engaging narratives, making complex historical themes accessible to a broader audience. His approach has firmly established him as a leading figure in the field of history, particularly concerning Russia.

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Revolutionary Russia, 1891 - 1991 Summary

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Revolutionary Russia, 1891 - 1991 Summary

Chapter List

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5. Dissolution and Legacy: The Decline of the Soviet Union and Modern Russia

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1. The Seeds of Change: Russia's Social and Political Landscape Before 1917

In the decades leading up to the 1917 revolutions, Russia experienced profound social and political changes that laid the groundwork for revolutionary upheaval. This period was marked by a complex interplay of economic shifts, societal transformations, and the burgeoning awareness of political identity among various social groups.

At the heart of these changes was the agrarian structure of Russian society, which remained largely feudal despite the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. The newly liberated peasants often found themselves in dire economic conditions, as they were given insufficient land and faced heavy redemption payments. This created widespread discontent and a burgeoning rural class of impoverished farmers who would later become key participants in the revolutionary movements. Peasant revolts were not uncommon, as groups like the 'Land and Liberty' movement sought to address the grievances of the peasantry.

Simultaneously, the rapid industrialization that began in the late 19th century brought about a new working class, concentrated primarily in urban centers like St. Petersburg and Moscow. This working class was characterized by long hours, dangerous working conditions, and low wages, conditions that fueled the rise of labor movements and socialist ideologies.



The formation of trade unions and strikes became a common response to exploitation, exemplified by the 1905 Revolution, which was spurred by events such as "Bloody Sunday" when peaceful protesters were gunned down by the Imperial Guard.

Intellectual and political ideologies flourished during this period, influenced by the writings of figures like Karl Marx and the failures of the autocratic tsarist regime. The introduction of liberal ideas began to take root among the educated middle class, leading to the establishment of political organizations such as the Constitutional Democrats (Kadets) who sought a constitutional monarchy and civil rights. The Workers' Social Democratic Party, which later split between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, played a crucial role in mobilizing the proletariat, articulating their rights, and calling for a radical transformation of socio-economic structures.

Socially, divisions within Russian society deepened along ethnic and class lines. The diverse composition of the Russian Empire included numerous ethnic minorities, each with its own national aspirations. Growing nationalist sentiments contributed to a climate of instability and unrest as various groups demanded autonomy and rights. This fragmentation was exemplified by the October Manifesto of 1905, which attempted to quell dissatisfaction by promising civil liberties and the establishment of a State Duma—a representative assembly. However, the Duma's limited power and the tsar's

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reluctance to implement meaningful reforms demonstrated the regime's inherent weaknesses.

The political landscape before 1917 was further complicated by the ongoing tensions from World War I. The war severely strained the Russian economy, exacerbating food shortages and military losses. The disillusionment with the tsarist regime reached a boiling point as soldiers returned home demoralized and disenchanted. This culminated in widespread riots and strikes, most notably the significant protests in Petrograd in early 1917, which marked the immediate prelude to the February Revolution.

Overall, the seeds of change in Russia's social and political landscape were deeply rooted in historical grievances, economic strife, and an awakening political consciousness among various segments of society. These factors not only set the stage for the revolutions of 1917 but also indicated an impending transformation that would alter the course of Russian history forever.

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2. The Tempest of Revolution: The February and October Revolutions of 1917

The year 1917 marked a pivotal turning point in Russian history with the occurrence of two significant revolutions that dismantled centuries of imperial rule and laid the groundwork for the Soviet state. The February and October Revolutions were fueled by a complex web of social, political, and economic discontent that had been simmering in Russia for decades.

Starting with the February Revolution, this uprising was largely spontaneous and driven by the grievances of the working class and the soldiers who were disillusioned with the ongoing hardships caused by World War I. By 1917, Russia was embroiled in a catastrophic war that had led to immense loss of life, a devastated economy, and widespread food shortages. The war exacerbated existing class tensions, as the nobility and the wealthy continued to thrive while the peasants and workers suffered unbearably. Discontent grew when bread rationing was instituted in Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg), leading to hunger and unrest among the populace, which was made worse by the brutal winter.

When protests erupted in February 1917, they quickly escalated beyond mere bread riots. On International Women's Day, women workers took to the streets to demand food and an end to the war. Their cries resonated with male workers and soldiers, and soon millions joined the protests. The unrest



led to mass strikes, demonstrations, and ultimately the forces of the Tsar losing control of the city. The military began to side with the revolutionaries, signaling the regime's collapse.

On March 2, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated, bringing an end to over three centuries of Romanov rule. The abdication followed the formation of a provisional government composed primarily of liberal and moderate socialist leaders who were initially hailed as heroes of the revolution. However, the provisional government soon faced criticism for its decision to continue fighting in World War I and for its failure to address key social issues, such as land reforms and worker rights. This disappointingly slow response to the urgent needs of the people provided fertile ground for more radical factions.

In stark contrast to the provisional government, the Soviet, a council formed from workers' and soldiers' deputies, began to gain traction. Led by the Bolsheviks, a radical socialist faction under Vladimir Lenin, the Soviet capitalized on the widespread dissatisfaction with the provisional government. In his April Theses, Lenin called for "all power to the Soviets" and advocated for an end to the war and the transfer of land to the peasants. His powerful rhetoric and promises of peace, land, and bread resonated with a war-weary public that was eager for radical change.

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The growing popularity of the Bolsheviks signaled a shift in the landscape of revolutionary Russia, culminating in the October Revolution. By October 1917, the discontent with the provisional government had become palpable. The Bolsheviks, having gained significant support among soldiers, workers, and the peasantry, were ready to act decisively. On the night of October 24-25, they launched a planned armed insurrection, seizing key locations in Petrograd, including the Winter Palace, where the government was headquartered.

This insurrection was remarkably swift and almost bloodless, with key military factions siding with the Bolsheviks. By the following morning, the provisional government had been virtually dismantled, and the Bolsheviks declared their control over the capital. Lenin's triumph marked a seismic shift in Russian politics and society, leading to the establishment of the world's first socialist state.

These revolutions were not just political upheavals; they transformed the very fabric of Russian society. They paved the way for radical changes in governance, economy, and social structure. Lenin, alongside other Bolshevik leaders, sought to implement policies that reflected revolutionary ideals, setting profound changes in motion that would define the Soviet Union's trajectory for decades to come. Meanwhile, the impact of the October Revolution sparked global interest and established a counterpoint to

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capitalism, influencing revolutionary movements worldwide.

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3. Civil War and Beyond: The Struggle for Power in Post-Revolutionary Russia

The Civil War in Russia, which erupted in the aftermath of the October Revolution of 1917, marked a tumultuous struggle for power that would shape the future of the nation. This conflict was not merely a war between the Bolshevik government and its opponents; it encapsulated the deep-rooted social, political, and economic issues that had plagued Russia for centuries.

In the immediate wake of the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks faced a plethora of adversaries, collectively known as the White forces, who were united by a desire to overthrow Lenin's regime. The Whites included a motley coalition of monarchists, liberals, and socialists who opposed Bolshevik policies, particularly land redistribution and the withdrawal from World War I. One of the most significant factions among the Whites was the army of Admiral Alexander Kolchak, who sought to reincorporate Russia into the war effort against the Central Powers, thereby appealing to patriotic sentiments.

On the other side, the Bolsheviks were fiercely determined to consolidate their hold on power. They implemented a series of radical reforms aimed at securing peasant support, including the decree on land which abolished private property and redistributed land to the peasants. However, these reforms often devolved into chaos, exacerbated by the desperate conditions

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following the collapse of the Imperial regime.

The conflict was characterized by brutal violence, atrocities, and widespread suffering. The Red Army, under the command of Leon Trotsky, showed remarkable resilience and tactical innovation. One notable case was the use of the Cheka, the Bolshevik secret police, which ruthlessly suppressed dissent, reinforcing the control of the Communist Party over the nascent Soviet state. While the Red Army ultimately triumphed thanks in part to superior organization and morale, the war left a legacy of bitterness, entrenched divisions, and a severely damaged economy.

As the Civil War effectively concluded by 1922, a power vacuum remained, and the struggle for dominance within the Party intensified. Disagreements emerged among the Bolshevik leadership about the future direction of the state, particularly concerning the approach to international socialism and economic policy. The death of Lenin in 1924 catalyzed this struggle, sparking a fierce contest between his potential successors, most prominently Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky.

Stalin's ascent to power was marked by political maneuvering and the consolidation of power through a series of ruthless purges that eliminated rivals and dissenters both within the Party and society at large. Trotsky, despite his key role in the revolution and military strategy, was eventually



exiled and assassinated, symbolizing Stalin's complete dominance.

In the years following the Civil War, Russia underwent drastic transformations as the Bolshevik government implemented War Communism. Under this policy, the state seized control of all means of production and distribution, leading to widespread famine, notably the 1921 famine that resulted in millions of deaths. This era tested the social fabric of Russian society, as industrial workers, peasants, and soldiers grappled with the harsh realities of bureaucratic control and authoritarian governance.

In response to the catastrophic economic conditions, the Soviet government transitioned to the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921, allowing for limited private enterprise and market mechanisms. This pragmatism was not indicative of a retreat from revolutionary principles, but rather a tactical adjustment to stabilize the economy and garner support among the peasantry.

The 1920s and early 1930s were a critical transitional period, characterized by tensions inherent in balancing rapid industrialization against the socio-economic realities of a largely agrarian society. While the Bolsheviks sought to forge a new Soviet identity, they faced resistance from various social factions, including the burgeoning class of kulaks, or wealthier peasants, who saw the policies as a direct threat to their livelihoods.

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Ultimately, the power struggles and social upheavals of the Civil War and the interwar period laid the groundwork for Stalin's later policies of forced collectivization and rapid industrialization in the 1930s. These policies would further entrench the Communist regime's control over society, but at an immense human cost, setting the stage for both the terrifying purges and the remarkable industrial achievements that would define the Soviet Union in the subsequent decades.

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4. Stalin's Reign: The Transformation of Soviet Society in the 1930s and 1940s

Stalin's reign marked a significant transformation in Soviet society during the 1930s and 1940s. This period was characterized by rapid industrialization, widespread collectivization of agriculture, and a dramatic shift in political, social, and cultural life. Under Stalin's leadership, the Soviet Union underwent changes that aimed not only to bolster the economy but also to alter the fabric of social interactions, ideologies, and the state's relationship with its citizens.

The first major element of transformation was Stalin's drive for industrialization, which was encapsulated in his Five-Year Plans. Initiated in 1928, these plans aimed to accelerate the production of industrial goods and increase the efficiency of state-owned enterprises. The rapid expansion of heavy industries, such as steel and coal, fueled the economic engine of the USSR and aimed to make the nation self-sufficient and competitive on the global stage. By prioritizing heavy industry over consumer goods, Stalin's regime transformed the Soviet economy drastically. Factories were built at an alarming pace, and cities sprouted around these new industrial hubs.

One mobilizing force behind this transformation was the massive influx of labor into the cities, which altered the demographic landscape of Russia. Millions of peasants migrated from rural areas seeking employment,



contributing to the urbanization of Soviet society. However, this shift came at a high human cost. The working conditions in factories were often brutal, with long hours, low wages, and unsafe environments. The emphasis on meeting production quotas led to a culture of fear and coercion, where workers were ruthlessly disciplined for failure to perform.

Simultaneously, Stalin instituted the policy of collectivization, which fundamentally reorganized traditional agricultural practices. By 1930, this policy aimed to consolidate individual landholdings and labor into collective farms, known as kolkhozes. The rationale behind collectivization was to increase agricultural productivity through mechanization and large-scale farming, ultimately supporting the industrial workforce with surplus food. However, the implementation of collectivization was catastrophic for many, leading to widespread famine, particularly in Ukraine during the Holodomor of 1932-1933, which resulted in millions of deaths. The brutality with which this policy was enforced, including the liquidation of the kulaks (wealthier peasants), illustrated Stalin's unwillingness to tolerate any opposition to his methods.

The political climate under Stalin was fiercely oppressive. A culture of surveillance and mistrust permeated society as the state sought to root out any potential dissenters. The Great Purge (1936-1938) epitomized this era of paranoia, as hundreds of thousands were executed or sent to labor camps



known as gulags. High-ranking officials of the Communist Party, military leaders, and ordinary citizens were accused of treachery and conspiracies against the state. The purges not only eliminated potential threats to Stalin's power but also instilled a pervasive atmosphere of fear and compliance within the general populace.

In terms of cultural transformation, the regime promoted socialist realism as the guiding artistic style, which mandated that all literature, music, and art ought to glorify Soviet ideals and the working class. This dictated cultural output was intended to reinforce state narratives and promote loyalty to the Communist Party. Artists, writers, and musicians who failed to adhere to these strict guidelines faced censorship, persecution, or worse.

Stalin's rule also brought about significant changes in gender roles and family structure. Women's participation in the workforce became essential for the success of industrialization efforts. Women were encouraged to take on roles traditionally held by men, including factory work and other labor-intensive jobs. However, despite this shift, traditional family structures were largely endorsed, with policies promoting motherhood and family life as part of the state's strategy to build a strong Soviet citizenry.

In the international arena, the impact of Stalin's policies was felt during World War II. The Soviet Union faced immense challenges following the

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Nazi invasion in June 1941. The regime's initial negligence of potential threats, stemming from a misguided belief in the invulnerability of the Soviet state, exposed it to brutal warfare. However, the Soviet response, fueled by a blend of nationalist fervor and unity spurred by the dire circumstances, eventually contributed to the defeat of Nazi Germany.

The 1930s and 1940s under Stalin were indeed transformative for Soviet society, marked by industrial success at an immense human cost, brutal repression of dissent, and the shaping of a culture that both reflected and served the state's ambitions. These years laid the groundwork for the USSR's role in the subsequent global order and set the stage for the complexities that would define the Soviet state in the latter half of the 20th century.

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5. Dissolution and Legacy: The Decline of the Soviet Union and Modern Russia

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a pivotal moment in world history, reflecting a significant turning point not only for Russia but also for former Soviet republics and the rest of the globe. The decline of this vast empire was rooted in a complex interplay of political, economic, and social factors that accumulated over decades, underscoring the inherent vulnerabilities of a state predicated on totalitarian rule.

By the 1980s, the Soviet Union had entered a phase of stagnation. The economy was structured around central planning, which, while initially aiding rapid industrialization, became increasingly inefficient. The rigid bureaucracy failed to innovate or adapt, resulting in chronic shortages of consumer goods and a declining standard of living for many citizens. The catastrophic fallout from decisions made decades earlier dried up the once-thriving promise of socialism, leaving behind disillusionment and mounting public discontent.

Amid this backdrop of economic malaise, Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985 introduced a radical departure from tradition through his policies of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness). These initiatives aimed to reform the stagnant economic system and promote greater transparency and freedom of expression. While Gorbachev's intentions were to restore



legitimacy to the Communist Party and reinvigorate state control, they inadvertently unleashed forces that would contribute to the regime's demise.

Under glasnost, citizens began to voice their grievances more openly; discussions of the past, particularly regarding Stalin's purges and the Ukrainian famine, became part of public discourse. Participation in civic life surged, with people forming various movements aimed at addressing local and national issues. Notably, the independence movements in the Baltic states exemplified this new spirit. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania spearheaded efforts for sovereignty, culminating in mass demonstrations during the late 1980s, which Gorbachev ultimately could not contain without resorting to force, a move that would further tarnish the government's image.

As Gorbachev's reforms faltered, economic instability deepened, leading to spiraling inflation, growing unemployment, and widespread hardship. In late 1991, the situation reached a climax with the coup attempt by hardline communist elements within the party, an event that galvanized public sentiment against the existing regime. The failed coup ultimately undermined the power of the Communist Party, prompting Boris Yeltsin, then the president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, to rise as a symbol of resistance. Yeltsin's decisive actions during the coup not only marginalized Gorbachev but also positioned him as a leader advocating for a



transition to a market economy and democratic governance.

In December 1991, the Soviet Union officially dissolved, rendering a dramatic end to an era that had lasted for nearly seven decades. This sudden collapse left polarizing legacies that profoundly shaped modern Russia. In place of the centralized Soviet system, Yeltsin adopted radical reforms aimed at transitioning to capitalism. While these reforms were initially seen as necessary to facilitate political and economic liberalization, they led to severe consequences, including rampant inflation, corruption, and increased inequality. Particularly notorious was the period of 'shock therapy,' which unleashed painful economic changes that resulted in widespread poverty and social dislocation, further exacerbating public sentiments against the new order.

The 1990s in Russia were marked by volatility, with ongoing struggles between oligarchs who gained wealth and influence in the new capitalist environment, burgeoning crime syndicates, and a government grappling with maintaining order and legitimacy. As the decade progressed, the perception of chaos during the Yeltsin years created a longing for stability among citizens.

This desire for stability paved the way for Vladimir Putin's ascent to power at the turn of the millennium. Initially hailed for restoring order and

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pursuing policies aimed at revitalizing the economy, Putin's administration represented a consolidation of power and the reassertion of state control over various sectors, particularly energy. His government undertook significant measures to overcome the chaotic legacies of the 1990s, including re-nationalizing key industries, and restoring a semblance of national pride.

However, the legacy of the Soviet Union continued to permeate Russian politics and society. The pervasive influence of former KGB operatives in government, the use of state media to cultivate a personalized form of governance, and the centralization of power under Putin highlighted the contradictions of a country grappling with its Soviet past while attempting to forge a new identity.

Thus, the dissolution of the Soviet Union not only ended a chapter of communist governance but also initiated an ongoing struggle for Russian identity in a landscape shaped by both historical legacy and modern aspirations. The tensions between nostalgia for the past and the pressing demands of a new globalized world remain salient, influencing Russia's international relations and domestic policies to this day.

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