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Preview Preview Having come to power in October 1917 by means of a coup d'état, Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks spent the next few years struggling to maintain their rule against widespread popular opposition. They had overthrown the provisional democratic government and were inherently hostile to any form of popular participation in politics. In the name of the revolutionary cause, they employed ruthless methods to suppress real or perceived political enemies. The small, elite group of Bolshevik revolutionaries which formed the core of the newly established Communist Party dictatorship ruled by decree, enforced with terror. This tradition of tight centralization, with decision-making concentrated at the highest party levels, reached new dimensions under Joseph Stalin. As many of these archival documents show, there was little input from below. The party elite determined the goals of the state and the means of achieving them in almost complete isolation from the people. They believed that the interests of the individual were to be sacrificed to those of the state, which was advancing a sacred social task. Stalin's "revolution from above" sought to build socialism by means of forced collectivization and industrialization, programs that entailed tremendous human suffering and loss of life. Although this tragic episode in Soviet history at least had some economic purpose, the police terror inflicted upon the party and the population in the 1930s, in which millions of innocent people perished, had no rationale beyond assuring Stalin's absolute dominanc. By the time the Great Terror ended, Stalin had subjected all aspects of Soviet society to strict party-state control, not tolerating even the slightest expression of local initiative, let alone political unorthodoxy. The Stalinist leadership felt especially threatened by the intelligentsia, whose creative efforts were thwarted through the strictest censorship; by religious groups, who were persecuted and driven underground; and by non-Russian nationalities, many of whom were deported en masse to Siberia during World War II because Stalin questioned their loyalty. Although Stalin's successors also persecuted writers and dissidents, they used police terror more sparingly to coerce the population, and they sought to gain some popular support by relaxing political controls and introducing economic incentives. Nonetheless, strict centralization continued and eventually led to the economic decline, inefficiency, and apathy that characterized the 1970s and 1980s, and contributed to the Chernobyl' nuclear disaster. Mikhail Gorbachev's program of perestroika was a reaction to this situation, but its success was limited by his reluctance to abolish the bastions of Soviet power—the party, the police, and the centralized economic system—until he was forced to do so after the attempted coup in August 1991. By that time, however, it was too late to hold either the Communist leadership or the Soviet Union together. After seventy-four years of existence, the Soviet system crumbled. During the second half of the 1920s, Joseph Stalin set the stage for gaining absolute power by employing police repression against opposition elements within the Communist Party. The machinery of coercion had previously been used only against opponents of Bolshevism, not against party members themselves. The first victims were Politburo members Leon Trotsky, Grigori Zinov'ev, and Lev Kamenov, who were defeated and expelled from the party in late 1927. Stalin then turned against Nikolai Bukharin, who was denounced as a "right opposition," for opposing his policy of forced collectivization and rapid industrialization at the expense of the peasantry. Back to Top Stalin had eliminated all likely potential opposition to his leadership by late 1934 and was the unchallenged leader of both party and state. Nevertheless, he proceeded to purge the party rank and file and to terrorize the entire country with widespread arrests and executions. During the ensuing Great Terror, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936–1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union throughout World War II and until his death in March 1953. Translation of letter from Rykov Repression and Terror: Kirov Murder and Purges The murder of Sergei Kirov on December 1, 1934, set off a chain of events that culminated in the Great Terror of the 1930s. Kirov was a full member of the ruling Politburo, leader of the Leningrad party apparatus, and an influential member of the ruling elite. His concern for the welfare of the workers in Leningrad and his skill as an orator had earned him considerable popularity. Some party members had even approached him secretly with the proposal that he take over as general secretary. It is doubtful that Kirov represented an immediate threat to Stalin's predominance, but he did disagree with some of Stalin's policies, and Stalin had begun to doubt the loyalty of members of the Leningrad apparatus. In need of a pretext for launching a broad purge, Stalin evidently decided that murdering Kirov would be expedient. The murder was carried out by a young assassin named Leonid Nikolaev. Recent evidence has indicated that Stalin and the NKVD planned the crime. Stalin then used the murder as an excuse for introducing draconian laws against political crime and for conducting a witch-hunt for alleged conspirators against Kirov. Over the next four-and-a-half years, millions of innocent party members and others were arrested—many of them for complicity in the vast plot that supposedly lay behind the killing of Kirov. From the Soviet point of view, his murder was probably the crime of the century because it paved the way for the Great Terror. Stalin never visited Leningrad again and directed one of his most vicious post-War purges against the city—Russia's historic window to the West. Translation of speech of Bukharin Back to Top Secret Police From the beginning of their regime, the Bolsheviks relied on a strong secret, or political, police to buttress their rule. The first secret police, called the Cheka, was established in December 1917 as a temporary institution to be abolished once Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks had consolidated their power. The original Cheka, headed by Felix Dzerzhinskii, was empowered only to investigate "counterrevolutionary" crimes. But it soon acquired powers of summary justice and began a campaign of terror against the propertied classes and enemies of Bolshevism. Although many Bolsheviks viewed the Cheka with repugnance and spoke out against its excesses, its continued existence was seen as crucial to the survival of the new regime. Once the Civil War (1918–21) ended and the threat of domestic and foreign opposition had receded, the Cheka was disbanded. Its functions were transferred in 1922 to the State Political Directorate, or GPU, which was initially less powerful than its predecessor. Repression against the population lessened. But under party leader Joseph Stalin, the secret police again acquired vast punitive powers and in 1934 was renamed the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or NKVD. No longer subject to party control or restricted by law, the NKVD became a direct instrument of Stalin for use against the party and the country during the Great Terror of the 1930s. The secret police remained the most powerful and feared Soviet institution throughout the Stalinist period. Although the post-Stalin secret police, the KGB, no longer inflicted such large-scale purges, terror, and forced depopulation on the peoples of the Soviet Union, it continued to be used by the Kremlin leadership to suppress political and religious dissent. The head of the KGB was a key figure in resisting the democratization of the late 1980s and in organizing the attempted putsch of August 1991. Enlarge Union Press Read the translation Bookmark this item: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html#obj4> Back to Top The Gulag The Soviet system of forced labor camps was first established in 1919 under the Cheka, but it was not until the early 1930s that the camp population reached significant numbers. By 1934 the Gulag, or Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, then under the Cheka's successor organization the NKVD, had several million inmates. Prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals—along with political and religious dissenters. The Gulag, whose camps were located mainly in remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, made significant contributions to the Soviet economy in the period of Joseph Stalin. Gulag prisoners constructed the White Sea-Baltic Canal, the Moscow-Volga Canal, the Baikal-Amur main railroad line, numerous hydroelectric stations, and strategic roads and industrial enterprises in remote regions. GULAG manpower was also used for much of the country's lumbering and for the mining of coal, copper, and gold. Stalin constantly increased the number of projects assigned to the NKVD, which led to an increasing reliance on the Gulag. The Gulag also served as a source of workers for economic projects independent of the NKVD, which contracted its prisoners out to various economic enterprises. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. Prisoners received inadequate food rations and insufficient clothing, which made it difficult to endure the severe weather and the long working hours; sometimes the inmates were physically abused by camp guards. As a result, the death rate from exhaustion and disease in the camps was high. After Stalin died in 1953, the Gulag population was reduced significantly, and conditions for inmates somewhat improved. Forced labor camps continued to exist, although on a small scale, into the Gorbachev period, and the government even opened some camps to scrutiny by journalists and human rights activists. With the advance of democratization, political prisoners and prisoners of conscience all but disappeared from the camps. Back to Top Collectivization and Industrialization In November 1927, Joseph Stalin launched his "revolution from above" by setting two extraordinary goals for Soviet domestic policy: rapid industrialization and collectivization of agriculture. His aims were to erase all traces of the capitalism that had entered under the New Economic Policy and to transform the Soviet Union as quickly as possible, without regard to cost, into an industrialized and completely socialist state. Stalin's First Five-Year Plan, adopted by the party in 1928, called for rapid industrialization of the economy, with an emphasis on heavy industry. It set goals that were unrealistic—a 250 percent increase in overall industrial development and a 330 percent expansion in heavy industry alone. All industry and services were nationalized, managers were given predetermined output quotas by central planners, and trade unions were converted into mechanisms for increasing worker productivity. Many new industrial centers were developed, particularly in the Ural Mountains, and thousands of new plants were built throughout the country. But because Stalin insisted on unrealistic production targets, serious problems soon arose. With the greatest share of investment put into heavy industry, widespread shortages of consumer goods occurred. The First Five-Year Plan also called for transforming Soviet agriculture from predominantly individual farms into a system of large state collective farms. The Communist regime believed that collectivization would improve agricultural productivity and would produce grain reserves sufficiently large to feed the growing urban labor force. The anticipated surplus was to pay for industrialization. Collectivization was further expected to free many peasants for industrial work in the cities and to enable the party to extend its political dominance over the remaining peasantry. Stalin focused particular hostility on the wealthier peasants, or kulaks. About one million kulak households (some five million people) were deported and never heard from again. Forced collectivization of the remaining peasants, which was often fiercely resisted, resulted in a disastrous disruption of agricultural productivity and a catastrophic famine in 1932–33. Although the First Five-Year Plan called for the collectivization of only twenty percent of peasant households, by 1940 approximately ninety-seven percent of all peasant households had been collectivized and private ownership of property almost entirely eliminated. Forced collectivization helped achieve Stalin's goal of rapid industrialization, but the human costs were incalculable. Back to Top Anti-religious Campaigns The Soviet Union was the first state to have as an ideological objective the elimination of religion. Toward that end, the Communist regime confiscated church property, ridiculed religion, harassed believers, and propagated atheism in the schools. Actions toward particular religions, however, were determined by State interests, and most organized religions were never outlawed. The main target of the anti-religious campaign in the 1920s and 1930s was the Russian Orthodox Church, which had the largest number of faithful. Nearly all of its clergy, and many of its believers, were shot or sent to labor camps. Theological schools were closed, and church publications were prohibited. By 1939 only about 500 of over 50,000 churches remained open. After Nazi Germany's attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, Joseph Stalin revived the Russian Orthodox Church to intensify patriotic support for the war effort. By 1957 about 22,000 Russian Orthodox churches had become active. But in 1959 Nikita Khrushchev initiated his own campaign against the Russian Orthodox Church and forced the closure of about 12,000 churches. By 1985 fewer than 7,000 churches remained active. Members of the church hierarchy were jailed or forced out, their places taken by docile clergy, many of whom had ties with the KGB. Campaigns against other religions were closely associated with particular nationalities, especially if they recognized a foreign religious authority such as the Pope. By 1926, the Roman Catholic Church had no bishops left in the Soviet Union, and by 1941 only two of the almost 1,200 churches that had existed in 1917, mostly in Lithuania, were still active. The Ukrainian Catholic Church (Uniate), linked with Ukrainian nationalism, was forcibly subordinated in 1946 to the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches of Belorussia and Ukraine were suppressed twice, in the late 1920s and again in 1944. Attacks on Judaism were endemic throughout the Soviet period, and the organized practice of Judaism became almost impossible. Protestant denominations and other sects were also persecuted. The All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian Baptists, established by the government in 1944, typically was forced to confine its activities to the narrow act of worship and denied most opportunities for religious teaching and publication. Fearful of a pan-Islamic movement, the Soviet regime systematically suppressed Islam by force, until 1941. The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union that year led the government to adopt a policy of official toleration of Islam while actively encouraging atheism among Muslims. Here is a letter of March 19, 1922, from Lenin via Molotov to members of the Politburo, outlining a brutal plan of action against the "Black Hundreds" clergy and their followers, who were denying the government decree to remove church valuables (purported by the government to be used to fund famine relief). Lenin proposed the arrest and quick trial of the insurrectionists in Shuia, followed by a ruthless campaign to shoot a large number of the reactionary clergy and bourgeois and urged that removal of valuables from the richest churches and monasteries be finished quickly. Enlarge Letter from Lenin. Page 2. Page 3. Page 4. Read the translation Bookmark this item: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html#obj10> Back to Top Attacks on Intelligentsia: Early Attacks In the years immediately following their accession to power in 1917, the Bolsheviks took measures to prevent challenges to their new regime, beginning with eliminating political opposition. When the freely-elected Constituent Assembly did not acknowledge the primacy of the Bolshevik government, Vladimir Lenin dissolved it in January 1918. The Left Socialist Revolutionary Party, which protested the action, withdrew from the Bolshevik coalition in March, and its members were automatically branded enemies of the people. Numerous opposition groups posed military threats from various parts of the country, placing the survival of the revolution in jeopardy. Between 1918 and 1921, a state of civil war existed. Bolshevik policy toward its detractors, and particularly toward articulate, intellectual criticism, hardened considerably. Suppression of newspapers, initially described as a temporary measure, became a permanent policy. Lenin considered the Constitutional Democrats (Kadets) the center of a conspiracy against Bolshevik rule. In 1919, he began mass arrests of professors and scientists who had been Kadets, and deported Kadets. Socialist Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, and Nationalists. The Bolshevik leadership sought rapidly to purge Russia of past leaders in order to build the future on a clean slate. These harsh measures alienated a large number of the intellectuals who had supported the overthrow of the tsarist order. The suppression of democratic institutions evoked strong protests from academics and artists, who felt betrayed in their idealistic belief that revolution would bring a free society. Writers who had emigrated shortly after the revolution published stinging attacks on the new government from abroad. As a result, further exit permits for artists were generally denied. The disenchantment of the majority of intellectuals did not surprise Lenin, who saw the old Russian intelligentsia as a kind of rival to his "party of a new type," which alone could bring revolutionary consciousness to the working class. In his view, artists generally served bourgeois interests, a notion that fueled the persecution of intellectuals throughout the Soviet period. Back to Top Attacks on Intelligentsia: Renewed Attacks The pattern of suppressing intellectual activity, with intermittent periods of relaxation, helped the party leadership reinforce its authority. After 1923, when threats to the revolution's survival had disappeared, intellectuals enjoyed relative creative freedom while the regime concentrated on improving the country's economic plight by allowing limited free enterprise under the Lenin's New Economic Policy. But in 1928, the Central Committee established the right of the party to exercise guidance over literature; and in 1932 literary and artistic organizations were restructured to promote a specified style called socialist realism. Works that did not contribute to the building of socialism were banned. Lenin had seen the need for increasing revolutionary consciousness in workers. Stalin now asserted that art should not merely serve society, but do so in a way determined by the party and its megalomaniacal plans for transforming society. As a result, artists and intellectuals as well as political figures became victims of the Great Terror of the 1930s. During the war against Nazi Germany, artists were permitted to infuse their works with patriotism and to direct them against the enemy. The victory in 1945, however, brought a return to repression against deviation from party policy. Andrei Zhdanov, who had been Stalin's spokesman on cultural affairs since 1934, led the attack. He viciously denounced such writers as Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, and Mikhail Zoshchenko, who were labeled "anti-Soviet, underminers of socialist realism, and unduly pessimistic." Individuals were expelled from the Union of Writers, and offending periodicals were either abolished or brought under direct party control. Zhdanov died in 1948, but the cultural purge known as the Zhdanovschchina endured for several more years. The noted filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and great composers such as Sergei Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich were denounced for "neglect of ideology and subservience to Western influence." The attacks extended to scientists and philosophers and continued until after Stalin's death in 1953. Back to Top Attacks on Intelligentsia: Censorship Creative writers enjoyed great prestige in both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union because of literature's unique role as a sounding board for deeper political and social issues. Vladimir Lenin believed that literature and art could be exploited for ideological and political as well as educational purposes. As a result, the party rapidly established control over print and electronic media, book publishing and distribution, bookstores and libraries, and it created or abolished newspapers and periodicals at will. Communist Party ideology influenced the creative process from the moment of artistic inspiration. The party, in effect, served as the artist's Muse. In 1932 the party established socialist realism as the only acceptable aesthetic—measuring merit by the degree to which a work contributed to building socialism among the masses. The Union of Writers was created the same year to harness writers to the Marxist-Leninist cause. Goskomizdat (State Committee for Publishing Houses, Printing Plants, and the Book Trade), in conjunction with the Union's secretariat, made all publishing decisions; the very allocation of paper became a hidden censorship mechanism. Glavit (Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs), created in 1922, was responsible for censorship, which came later in the creative process. The party's guidance had already affected the process long before the manuscript reached the censor's pen. The Soviet censorship system was thus more pervasive than that of the tsars or of most other recent dictatorships. Mikhail Gorbachev needed to enlist the support of writers and journalists to promote his reforms. He did so by launching his policy of glasnost' in 1986, challenging the foundations of censorship by undermining the authority of the Union of Writers to determine which works were appropriate for publication. Officials from the Union were required to place works directly in the open market and to allow these works to be judged according to reader preferences, thereby moving the barrier between writer and reader and marking the beginning of the end of Communist party censorship. Statistical report of March 21, 1968, from V. Chebrikov, chairman of the KGB, detailing 1967 investigations of the distribution of anonymous publications hostile to the Soviet government and the Communist Party. Enlarge Statistical report. Page 2. Page 3. Read the translation Bookmark this item: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html#obj14> Back to Top Attacks on Intelligentsia: Suppressing Dissidents The Communist regime considered dissent in the Soviet Union a repudiation of the proletarian struggle and a violation of Marxism-Leninism, and thus a threat to its authority. The proletariat was seen as selflessly striving for progress in the building of socialism, whereas the bourgeoisie was seen as selfishly fighting to maintain the status quo. According to Marxist ideology, class struggle was the engine of change in all social development. Vladimir Lenin's ideological contribution was to make the party itself the exclusive "vanguard of the proletariat" and thus the final arbiter of what was proletarian or bourgeois. The secret police was enlisted to enforce the party's ideology and to suppress dissent. Because the party's legitimacy rested on the basic correctness of its ideology, failures in practical policy were never attributed to ideology itself. To maintain the party's ideological authority, religion had to be condemned outright, and history periodically revised to match the current party line. Books and magazines viewed as no longer politically correct were removed from libraries. Scientists, artists, poets, and others, including many who did not think of themselves as dissidents but whose work appeared critical of Soviet life, were systematically persecuted and even prosecuted. Often they were declared either enemies of the state and imprisoned, or insane and committed to punitive mental hospitals. To speak for human rights or to support freedom of expression was to question the very basis of Marxism-Leninism and the legitimacy of the party's rule. Among those harassed and persecuted were world-renowned artists and scientists, including Nobel Prize winners Boris Pasternak, who was forced to refuse his prize; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who was forcibly removed from the USSR; and Andrei Sakharov, who was expelled from the Academy of Sciences and internally exiled to a closed city. A prime mover of change was Mikhail Gorbachev, whose policy of glasnost' allowed freedom of expression and resulted in the abandonment of Marxist-Leninist ideology and a loss of legitimacy for the party. In a telegram from 1971, noted Soviet physicist Andrei Sakharov supports the protests of two dissidents, V. Fainberg and V. Boriso, who have been hospitalized in a Leningrad psychiatric institution for "social behavior." An accompanying memorandum from the USSR Minister of Health affirms the legitimacy and advisability of hospitalizing the two dissidents in the institution, run by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and denies the use of mind-altering medications in their treatment. Soviet physicist Andrei Sakharov's telegram supporting the protests of two dissidents, V. Fainberg and V. Borisov. [image not available at this time] Read the translation Bookmark this item: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html#obj16> Back to Top Ukrainian Famine The dreadful famine that engulfed Ukraine, the northern Caucasus, and the lower Volga River area in 1932-1933 was the result of Joseph Stalin's policy of forced collectivization. The heaviest losses occurred in Ukraine, which had been the most productive agricultural area of the Soviet Union. Stalin was determined to crush all vestiges of Ukrainian nationalism. Thus, the famine was accompanied by a devastating purge of the Ukrainian intelligentsia and the Ukrainian Communist party itself. The famine broke the peasants' will to resist collectivization and left Ukraine politically, socially, and psychologically traumatized. The policy of all-out collectivization instituted by Stalin in 1929 to finance industrialization had a disastrous effect on agricultural productivity. Nevertheless, in 1932 Stalin raised Ukraine's grain procurement quotas by forty-four percent. This meant that there would not be enough grain to feed the peasants, since Soviet law required that no grain from a collective farm could be given to the members of the farm until the government's quota was met. Stalin's decision and the methods used to implement it condemned millions of peasants to death by starvation. Party officials, with the aid of regular troops and secret police units, waged a merciless war of attrition against peasants who refused to give up their grain. Even indispensable seed grain was forcibly confiscated from peasant households. Any man, woman, or child caught taking even a handful of grain from a collective farm could be, and often was, executed or deported. Those who did not appear to be starving were often suspected of hoarding grain. Peasants were prevented from leaving their villages by the NKVD and a system of internal passports. The death toll from the 1932-33 famine in Ukraine has been estimated between six million and seven million. According to a Soviet author, "Before they died, people often lost their senses and ceased to be human beings." Yet one of Stalin's lieutenants in Ukraine stated in 1933 that the famine was a great success. It showed the peasants "who is the master here. It cost millions of lives, but the collective farm system is here to stay." Back to Top Deportations Joseph Stalin's forcible resettlement of over 1.5 million people, mostly Muslims, during and after World War II is now viewed by many human rights experts in Russia as one of his most drastic genocidal acts. Volga Germans and seven nationalities of Crimea and the northern Caucasus were deported; the Crimean Tatars, Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, Karachai, and Meskhetians. Other minorities evicted from the Black Sea coastal region included Bulgarians, Greeks, and Armenians. Resistance to Soviet rule, separatism, and widespread collaboration with the German occupation forces were among the official reasons for the deportation of these non-Russian peoples. The possibility of a German attack was used to justify the resettlement of the ethnically mixed population of Mtskheta, in southwestern Georgia. The Balkars were punished for allegedly having sent a white horse as a gift to Adolf Hitler. The deportees were rounded up and transported, usually in railroad cattle cars, to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizia, and Siberia—areas called "human dumping grounds" by historian Robert Conquest. Most estimates indicate that close to two-fifths of the affected populations perished. The plight of the Crimean Tatars was exceptionally harsh: nearly half died of hunger in the first eighteen months after being banished from their homeland. In February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev condemned the deportations as a violation of Leninist principles. In his "secret speech" to the Twentieth Party Congress, he stated that the Ukrainians avoided such a fate "only because there were too many of them and there was no place to which to deport them." That year, the Soviet government issued decrees on the restoration of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic and the Kabardino-Balkar Autonomous Republic, the formation of the Kalmyk Autonomous Oblast, and the reorganization of the Cherkess Autonomous Oblast" into the Karachai-Cherkess Autonomous Oblast". The Crimean Tatars, Meskhetians, and Volga Germans, however, were only partially rehabilitated and were not, for the most part, permitted to return to their homelands until after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Back to Top The Jewish Antifascist Committee The Jewish Antifascist Committee (JAC) was formed in Kuibyshev in April 1942. Two Polish Jewish socialists, Henryk Erlich and Viktor Alor (both of whom were later secretly executed), may have proposed the idea to Lavrenti Beria, the head of the NKVD. The organization was meant to serve the interests of Soviet foreign policy and the Soviet military through media propaganda—as well as through personal contacts with Jews abroad, especially in Britain and the United States, designed to influence public opinion and enlist foreign support for the Soviet war effort. The chairman of the JAC was Solomon Mikhoels, a famous actor and director of the Moscow Yiddish State Theater. Shkane Epshtein, a Yiddish journalist, was the secretary and editor of the JAC's newspaper, Eynikait (Unity). Other prominent JAC members were the poet Itzik Feffer, a former member of the Bund (a Jewish socialist movement that existed from 1897 to 1921 and supported the Mensheviks), the writer Il'ia Ehrenburg, General Aaron Katz of the Stalin Military Academy, and Boris Shmelovitch, the chief surgeon of the Red Army, as well as some non-Jews from the arts, sciences, and the military. A year after its establishment, the JAC was moved to Moscow and became one of the most important centers of Jewish culture and Yiddish literature until the German invasion. The JAC broadcast pro-Soviet propaganda to foreign audiences several times a week, telling them of the absence of anti-Semitism and of the great anti-Nazi efforts being made by the Soviet military. In 1948, Mikhoels was assassinated by secret agents of Stalin, and, as part of a newly launched official anti-Semitic campaign, the JAC was disbanded in November and most of its members arrested. Back to Top Chernobyl' In April 1986, Chernobyl' (Chornobyl' in Ukrainian) was an obscure city on the Pripiat' River in north-central Ukraine. Almost incidentally, its name was attached to the V.I. Lenin Nuclear Power Plant located about twenty-five kilometers upstream. On April 26, the city's anonymity vanished forever when, during a test at 1:21 A.M., the No. 4 reactor exploded and released thirty to forty times the radioactivity of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The world first learned of history's worst nuclear accident from Sweden, where abnormal radiation levels were registered at one of its nuclear facilities. Ranking as one of the greatest industrial accidents of all time, the Chernobyl' disaster and its impact on the course of Soviet events can scarcely be exaggerated. No one can predict what will finally be the exact number of human victims. Thirty-one lives were lost immediately. Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians, Russians, and Belorussians had to abandon entire cities and settlements within the thirty-kilometer zone of extreme contamination. Estimates vary, but it is likely that some 3 million people, more than 2 million in Belarus' alone, are still living in contaminated areas. The city of Chernobyl' is still inhabited by almost 10,000 people. Billions of rubles have been spent, and billions more will be needed to relocate communities and decontaminate the rich farmland. Chernobyl' has become a metaphor not only for the horror of uncontrolled nuclear power but also for the collapsing Soviet system and its reflexive secrecy and deception, disregard for the safety and welfare of workers and their families, and inability to deliver basic services such as health care and transportation, especially in crisis situations. The Chernobyl' catastrophe detailed what had been an ambitious nuclear power program and formed a fledgling environmental movement into a potent political force in Russia as well as a rallying point for achieving Ukrainian and Belorussian independence in 1991. Although still in operation, the Chernobyl' plant is scheduled for total shutdown in 1993. Back to Top Perestroika From modest beginnings at the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress in 1986, perestroika, Mikhail Gorbachev's program of economic, political, and social restructuring, became the unintended catalyst for dismantling what had taken nearly three-quarters of a century to erect: the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist totalitarian state. The world watched in disbelief but with growing admiration as Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan, democratic governments overthrown Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, Germany was reunited, the Warsaw Pact withered away, and the Cold War came to an abrupt end. In the Soviet Union itself, however, reactions to the new policies were mixed. Reform policies rocked the foundation of entrenched traditional power bases in the party, economy, and society but did not replace them entirely. Newfound freedoms of assembly, speech, and religion, the right to strike, and multicandidate elections undermined not only the Soviet Union's authoritarian structures, but also the familiar sense of order and predictability. Long-suppressed, bitter inter-ethnic, economic, and social grievances led to clashes, strikes, and growing crime rates. Gorbachev introduced policies designed to begin establishing a market economy by encouraging limited private ownership and profitability in Soviet industry and agriculture. But the Communist control system and over-centralization of power and privilege were maintained and new policies produced no economic miracles. Instead, lines got longer for scarce goods in the stores, civic unrest mounted, and bloody crackdowns claimed lives, particularly in the restive nationalist populations of the outlying Caucasus and Baltic states. On August 19, 1991, conservative elements in Gorbachev's own administration launched an abortive coup d'état to prevent the signing of a new union treaty the following day and to restore the party's power and authority. Boris Yeltsin, who had become Russia's first popularly elected president in June 1991, made the seat of government of his Russian republic, known as the White House, the rallying point for resistance to the organizers of the coup. Under his leadership, Russia embarked on even more far-reaching reforms as the Soviet Union broke up into its constituent republics and formed the Commonwealth of Independent States. A conference convened in Leningrad in October, 1990, by the conservative communist organization "Unity—for Leninism and Communist Ideals" demanded radical changes in Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of perestroika and its implementation. Participants in the conference accused Gorbachev of following a course that would restore capitalism in the Soviet Union, and they appealed to party organizations and members to demand convocation of an extraordinary Party Congress to remove Gorbachev from power. This resolution was given to the Central Committee on November 29, 1990, and assigned for action to two Politburo members by V. Ivashko, who notes on the document, "Please think about this, and let's talk." Enlarge Resolution by the Society "Unity, for Leninism and Communist Ideals," October 28, 1990, expressing lack of confidence in the policies of Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Central Committee. Page 2. Page 3. Read the translation Bookmark this item: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html#obj22> Back to Top

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