

The Soviet State, Born of a Dream, Dies

By SERGE SCHMEMANN Special to The New York Times

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Associated Press

Mikhail S. Gorbachev after announcing his resignation last night as President of the Soviet Union.

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MOSCOW, Dec. 25 — The Soviet state, marked throughout its brief but tumultuous history by great achievement and terrible suffering, died today after a long and painful decline. It was 74 years old.

Conceived in utopian promise and born in the violent upheavals of the "Great October Revolution of 1917," the union heaved its last in the dreary darkness of late December 1991, stripped of ideology, dismembered, bankrupt and hungry — but awe-inspiring even in its fall.

The end of the Soviet Union came with the resignation of Mikhail S. Gorbachev to make way for a new "Commonwealth of Independent States." At 7:32 P.M., shortly after the conclusion of his televised address, the red flag with hammer-and-sickle was lowered over the Kremlin and the white-blue-red Russian flag rose in its stead.

No Ceremony, Only Chimes

There was no ceremony, only the tolling of chimes from the Spassky Gate, cheers from a handful of surprised foreigners and an angry tirade from a lone war veteran.

Reactions to the death varied widely, according to Pravda, the former mouthpiece of the empire: "Some joyfully exclaim, 'Finita la comedia!' Others, heaping ash on their heads, raise their hands to the sky in horror and ask, what will be?"

The reaction depended somewhat on whether one listened to the ominous gunfire from Georgia, or

End of an Empire

A special report.

watched spellbound the bitter if dignified surrender of power by the last leader of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Mr. Gorbachev.

Most people vacillated. The taboos and chains were gone, but so was the food. The Soviet Union had given them pitifully little, but there was no guarantee that the strange-sounding "Commonwealth of Independent States" would do any better.

As for Mr. Gorbachev, public opinion polls indicated a virtually universal agreement that it was time for him to move on — not because he had failed, but because there was nothing more he could do.

It was perhaps a paradox that the ruler who presided over the collapse of the Soviet Union was the only one of its ill-starred leaders to leave office with a measure of dignity intact. It was possible that history would reach a different verdict, but among many thoughtful Russians, it was to his undying credit that he lifted the chains of totalitarian dictatorship. Whether he could also have saved the economy was another question.

"Gorbachev was unable to change the living standards of the people, but he changed the people," Komsomolskaya Pravda wrote in a sympathetic farewell that seemed to capture the dominant mood. He didn't know how to make sausage, but he did know how to give freedom. And if someone believes that the former is more impor-

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Lee Romero/The New York Times

Having a Home Is Not a Prerequisite for Having the Spirit of Christmas

Leroy Lewis built a Christmas tree at his sometime home under the Queensboro Bridge on First Avenue in Manhattan. Lenore Elners stopped yesterday to wish Mr. Lewis a merry Christmas.

Soviet State: Born of a Dream, Raised in Nightmares

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tant than the latter, he is likely never to have either.”

Another man might have done things differently. But it was difficult to conceive that any of those then available — the conservative Yegor K. Ligachev, the rough-hewn Boris N. Yeltsin, the bureaucratic Nikolai I. Ryzhkov or the scholarly Eduard A. Shevardnadze — possessed just that blend of reformer and ideologue, of naïveté and ruthlessness, that enabled Mr. Gorbachev to lead the Communists to the edge of the cliff.

“Gorbachev was a true instrument of fate,” declared Viktor Yerofeyev, a writer and literary critic. “He had just enough intelligence to change everything, but not enough to see that everything would be destroyed. He was bold enough to challenge his party, and cautious enough to let the party live until it lost its power. He had enough faith in Communism to be named its head, but enough doubts about it to destroy it. If he had seen everything clearly, he would not have changed Russia.”

Mr. Gorbachev struggled to the end, and beyond it, to keep the union alive. But in the end, it was by letting the union die and by stepping aside that he gave a new lease on life to the great Eurasian entity, whatever its name.

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