

RUSSIA:

TURNING BACK THE CLOCK?

IT'S BEEN 20 YEARS SINCE THE END OF THE COLD WAR. IS THIS ONCE-REPRESSIVE COUNTRY RETURNING TO ITS OLD WAYS?

FAST FACTS

AREA: 6.6 million sq mi
(U.S.: 3.7 million sq mi)

POPULATION: 143 million
(U.S.: 312 million)

PER CAPITA GDP: \$15,900
(U.S.: \$47,200)

RELIGIONS: Russian Orthodox, 20%; Islam, 15%; other Christian, 2%. Estimates vary; religion was discouraged during the Soviet era.

LANGUAGES: Russian, others

LIFE EXPECTANCY: males, 63 years; females, 75 years
(U.S.: 75/80)

SOURCES: The World Factbook (CIA); 2011 World Population Data Sheet [Population Reference Bureau]

Words to Know

- **glasnost** (*n*): an "openness" of political and social discussion.
- **market economy** (*n*): a system in which individuals and businesses—not government—decide the prices of goods.
- **oligarch** (*n*): one of a group of individuals who control a government, often for corrupt and selfish purposes.

Think of it as presidential musical chairs. In September, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev (*med-VYEH-dev*) announced that he won't run for re-election in March 2012. Instead, he'll step aside for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin—who has already served two terms as President. Back in 2008, then-President Putin named Medvedev as his successor. Now he wants his old job back.

He'll probably get it. As the candidate of the powerful United Russia Party, Putin is all but assured a victory in March. Recent changes to Russia's constitution mean that he could be in office until 2024.

To many observers, the exchange of jobs proves that Putin has been pulling the strings all along. Last year, a leaked diplomatic message caught U.S. diplomats describing Medvedev as "playing Robin to Putin's Batman."

Few Russians have expressed surprise. Ivan Caikin, 71, told *The New York Times* that his hopes for a democratic Russia had withered a long time ago. "They decide between themselves who will hold which job," he said. "It's like

a swap in chess—my bishop for your rook."

The Cold War

The power of Russia's leaders evokes two ghosts of the past: the Soviet Union and the Communist Party that controlled it (*see map, pp. 14-15*). For much of the 20th century, the Soviet Union was the world's largest country, covering one sixth of the planet's landmass.

The giant nation was created from the chaos of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Led by Vladimir Lenin, Russia's Communist rulers began to build a new and fearsome empire by absorbing the country's neighbors. Called the Soviet Union, it would grow to include 15 European and Asian states. Until the union dissolved, Russia remained its largest and most important state.

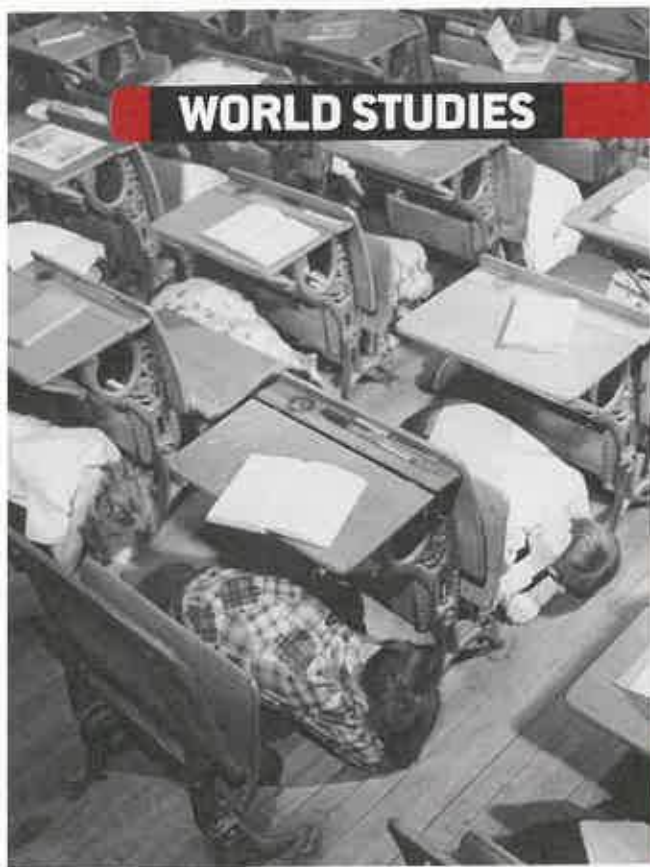
The rise of Communism frightened Western democracies. After World War II (1939-1945), the tension increased. The Soviet Union seized Poland and other countries in Eastern Europe, holding them captive through puppet Communist governments. The murderous Soviet

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President Dmitry Medvedev (*rear*), has stood in the shadow of his predecessor—and probable successor—Vladimir Putin.



Left: During the Cold War, U.S. schoolchildren learned to protect themselves from nuclear attack with "duck and cover" drills.

Above: Soviet leaders staged annual parades in Moscow to honor the 1917 revolution and display their military might.

leader Joseph Stalin and his successors declared themselves devoted to the destruction of the West.

The result was the Cold War, a 46-year power struggle between Communist countries led by the Soviet Union and democratic countries led by the U.S. There was no actual combat between Soviet and U.S. forces during this "war." Instead, its battles took place in other countries, such as Korea and Vietnam. In Germany, the Berlin Wall, built by East Germany's Communist government in 1961 to keep its people from escaping into democratic West Berlin, became a classic symbol of the Cold War.

Another aspect of the conflict was the arms race. Trying to outdo each other, the Soviet Union and the U.S. built stockpiles of nuclear weapons—in time, 70,000 of them. Soviets and Americans alike became terrified that a single bomb going off could trigger mass destruction.

During the 1950s and '60s, that fear ran deep. Around the U.S.,

schools instructed students to "duck and cover"—crouch under their desks—if they saw the flash of a nuclear bomb. Students were given dog tags so that their bodies could be identified after a nuclear attack.

In 1962, the Soviets installed nuclear missiles in Cuba. When the U.S. demanded their removal, the

says Russia expert Fiona Hill. "The terror of it was very real."

The Fall of Communism

In the end, the Soviet Union was undone by its own policies. Its economy stagnated under decades of ineffective and corrupt socialist programs. People had to wait years

“ There was a real risk of things getting out of control. The terror of it was very real. ”

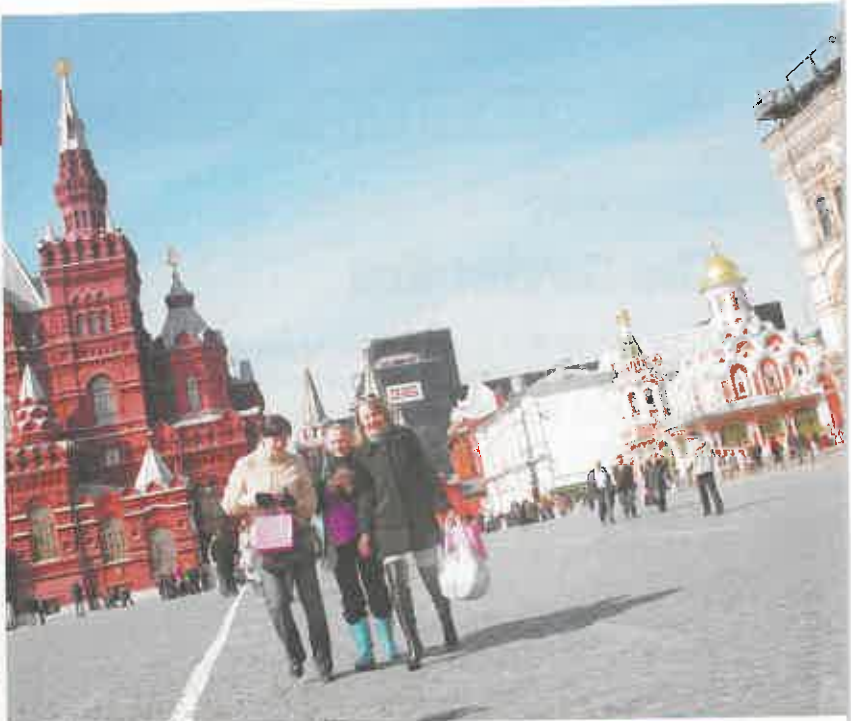
world came very close to nuclear war. For 10 days that October, before the Soviets backed down, Americans went to bed fearing that the world they knew might be destroyed while they slept.

Somehow, the nuclear powers made it through the Cold War without using their most destructive weapon. Yet the bomb cast a long shadow. "There was a real risk of things getting out of control,"

to buy a car or get a phone. Store shelves were often empty.

Then, in 1985, an energetic reformer named Mikhail Gorbachev took the reins of the Soviet Union. He eased restrictions on society with a policy called *glasnost*, or openness. Gorbachev also loosened the government's stranglehold on the economy with free-market reforms known as *perestroika*.

"I still entertained illusions that



Left: Mikhail Gorbachev and U.S. President Ronald Reagan in 1985, at one of their arms-control talks. They signed a treaty in 1987.

Above: Today, shoppers in Moscow, Russia's capital, enjoy an economy that has grown since Soviet days.

the system could be reformed,” Gorbachev told *Time* magazine in 2003.

But time had run out. By the late 1980s, Eastern European countries, fed up with Soviet repression, began to hold free elections. In 1989, a new East German government opened its borders. Ecstatic Germans knocked down the hated Berlin Wall.

Finally, in December 1991, after most of the Soviet republics had proclaimed independence, Russia did the same. Gorbachev bowed to the inevitable. On Christmas evening, he read a simple statement to the nation: the Soviet Union was no more. “We’re now living in a new world,” Gorbachev said.

Freedom—and Fear

In Russia, the first reaction was jubilation. “You waved good-bye to everything you had been born with,” says Dmitri Trenin, a Russia scholar. “Everything around you . . . was collapsing. And there was a promise of something new and better emerging.”

Post-Soviet Russia flirted with democracy under its first President, Boris Yeltsin. It adopted a new constitution and changed almost overnight to a **market economy**.

But chaos followed. Although the economy was no longer state-controlled, much of the nation’s wealth was looted by **oligarchs**. Prices of goods skyrocketed. Government corruption and crime ran unchecked.

In 1999, Putin took power. A former spy for the feared Soviet KGB security agency, he ruled as a new strongman. Stability returned; the economy grew rapidly. Many Russians were so relieved that they didn’t seem to notice—or care—that a Soviet-style control had returned.

On one hand, Russians today enjoy real liberties. “You have open borders,” says Trenin. “You have freedom to own property, freedom to worship, freedom to say things.”

Yet a recent poll revealed that 22 percent of adults would like to leave the country. Many

worry that Russia will experience a new era of stagnation. This is partly because the economy is too dependent on oil and gas, but also because it’s tightly controlled by the government, as in Soviet days.

Where is Russia headed now? In September, Putin promised to address the “dangerous level of social inequality” and “feeling of injustice” in Russian society.

But the distaste left by the “chess swap” of leaders remains. One young Russian told a reporter that he had been “naïve” to hope for change. “We have already been told,” he said, “who will be our next President.” —*Michael Wines*

Think About It

1. What was the Berlin Wall, and why was it erected?
2. Does it surprise you that more Russians don’t speak out against their government? Why or why not?

MapSearch

The Soviet Era

During World War II, the battle against Nazi Germany united the Soviet Union, Britain, and the U.S. Meeting at the Soviet city of Yalta in February 1945 with other Allied leaders, Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin agreed to hold elections in the countries that his armies liberated from Germany. Instead, after the war ended, Stalin set up puppet Communist governments in those nations, exporting Soviet repression and fear.

One of the first to sound the alarm was Winston Churchill, the former British Prime Minister. "An Iron Curtain has descended across the Continent," he said in a 1946 speech at a college in Missouri.

For the next four decades, throughout the Cold War, Soviet terror kept one third of Europe captive, blocking escape with troops, tanks, and walls. At the same time, the U.S. and the Soviet Union amassed stockpiles of nuclear weapons.

After studying these pages, answer the following questions.

COLD WAR EUROPE



Questions

Write your answers on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What was the capital of the Soviet Union?
2. What were the capitals of East Germany and West Germany?
3. Which city is located at 56°N, 38°E?
4. Which countries bordered Yugoslavia?
5. About how many miles separated the capitals of Czechoslovakia and Poland?
6. How did the Soviet Union come to control Eastern Europe?
7. What leader was one of the first to warn of the "Iron Curtain"?
8. The Iron Curtain ran between which two bodies of water?
9. Yalta is located on which body of water?
10. Define the term "Iron Curtain" in your own words. Do you think it was an effective metaphor? Why or why not?

TOP TO BOTTOM: BETTMANN CORP.; © SHEPARD SHERRELL/SABA CORP.; © GETTY IMAGES; MAP: JIM RICCARDO/ALAMY

1945-1989



Left to right (seated): British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin, at Yalta in 1945



A common sight for people of the Soviet Union: empty shelves in a grocery store. Still, these Moscow women had to line up for what little there was.



When East Germany's leaders opened the country's borders to the West in 1989, Germans smashed the hated Berlin Wall to pieces.