NO PREP

Russia and the Former USSR

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Russia and the Former USSR

Geography and Vastness

Russia is the largest country in the world, stretching across eleven time zones from Eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean. Its size alone makes it unique. Russia's landscape includes the Ural Mountains, which traditionally mark the boundary between Europe and Asia, the vast forests of Siberia, the Volga River (Europe's longest river), and the harsh tundra of the Arctic north. This geography provides enormous natural resources—oil, natural gas, coal, and minerals—but also makes transportation and communication challenging. The former Soviet Union (USSR), which collapsed in 1991, once included fifteen republics, from the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia to Central Asian nations such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. These

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History and Political Legacy

The Soviet Union was one of the most powerful states of the 20th century. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks established a communist state led by the Communist Party. Under leaders like Joseph Stalin, the USSR became a superpower, rivaling the United States during the Cold War. The government controlled the economy, society, and political life, leading to industrial growth but also widespread repression and shortages. By the late 1980s, economic stagnation and demands for reform weakened the USSR. Mikhail Gorbachev introduced glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring), but these changes accelerated the system's collapse. In 1991, the Soviet Union dissolved, creating fifteen independent states. Russia emerged as the largest, inheriting much of the Soviet military and economic power, but also facing massive challenges. Today, Russia maintains a strong central government, with Vladimir Putin playing a central role in politics since 2000.

While some former Soviet states have joined Western organizations like the European Union or NATO, others remain closely tied to Russia through trade, military alliances, or cultural ties. The legacy of the USSR still shapes the region's identity and geopolitics.

Economy and Global Influence

Russia's economy relies heavily on oil and natural gas exports, making it one of the world's top energy producers. Energy wealth has allowed Russia to remain a major global power, especially in Europe, where many countries depend on Russian gas. However, this dependence has also created vulnerability when energy prices fall or sanctions are imposed. The former Soviet republics vary greatly in their economic paths. The Baltic states have become integrated into the European Union, developing technology and service industries. Central Asia remains resource-rich, with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan relying on oil and gas. Ukraine, once part of the Soviet Union, has become a focal point of tensions between Russia and the West, especially after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Despite challenges, Russia maintains influence through its military, energy resources, and diplomacy. Its geography ensures it will always play a role in both Europe and Asia. The former Soviet republics continue to balance independence with the realities of Russian influence.

Conclusion: Russia and Its Neighbors Today

Russia and the former USSR remain central to understanding global politics. Geography, history, and resources ensure the region's influence will not fade. While Russia projects power through energy and military might, the newly independent states seek their own futures—some aligning with the West, others maintaining closer ties to Moscow. The story of Russia and the USSR shows how geography and political systems can shape not only a region but the entire world.

Key Information: Table: Russia and Former USSR at a Glance

Feature	Location	Importance
Ural Mountains	Russia	Divides Europe and Asia
Volga River	Western Russia	Longest river in Europe

Feature	Location	Importance
Glasnost & Perestroika	USSR, 1980s	Reforms leading to collapse
Crimea	Ukraine (annexed by Russia)	Major geopolitical conflict
USSR Collapse	1991	Created 15 independent states

Case Study Excerpt: The Fall of the Soviet Union

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was one of the most significant events of the 20th century. After decades of central planning, shortages, and political control, the USSR faced growing unrest. Economic stagnation meant that store shelves were often empty, and citizens faced long lines for basic goods. At the same time, national movements within the republics demanded independence. Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms of glasnost and perestroika were intended to modernize the system. Glasnost allowed more freedom of speech, while perestroika attempted to introduce limited market reforms. Instead of stabilizing the USSR, these policies revealed its weaknesses. The failed coup by hardline communists in August 1991 further weakened the central government. By December, the Soviet Union ceased to exist, replaced by independent republics like Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltic states. The fall of the USSR reshaped the global balance of power. The United States became the sole superpower, while Russia and the other republics faced uncertain futures. Some embraced democracy and market economies, while others struggled with corruption, authoritarianism, or conflict. The collapse remains a powerful reminder of how political and economic systems can unravel when reforms fail to meet the needs of society.

1. Why did Gorbachev introduce glasnost and perestroika, and how did they contribute to the collapse of the USSR?

2. What were some immediate consequences for the world after the Soviet Union dissolved?

Multiple Choice

1. What marked the official end of the Soviet Union?
    a) The signing of the Treaty of Versailles
    b) The launch of Sputnik in 1957
    c) Stalin's death in 1953
    d) Gorbachev's resignation in 1991

2. Which reforms were introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s?
    a) Glasnost and Perestroika
    b) Collectivization and Five-Year Plans
    c) New Economic Policy
    d) Iron Curtain Doctrine

3. Which region of the former USSR has integrated most closely with the European Union?
    a) Siberia
    b) Central Asia
    c) Baltic states
    d) Caucasus

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Ural Mountains	A) Longest river in Europe
2. ___ Volga River	B) Annexed by Russia in 2014
3. ___ Glasnost & Perestroika	C) Year of Soviet Union's collapse
4. ___ Crimea	D) Reforms leading to USSR collapse
5. ___ 1991	E) Boundary between Europe and Asia

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The _____ Mountains divide Europe from Asia.

2. The Soviet Union dissolved in _____.

3. Russia's economy depends heavily on _____ exports.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. How does Russia's geography affect its political and economic power?

_____

_____

_____

2. Why do some former Soviet states maintain close ties to Russia while others turn toward the West?

_____

_____

_____

3. What lessons can be drawn from the collapse of the Soviet Union about government reform and stability?