

RUSSIAN SOVIET FEDERATED SOCIALIST REPUBLIC (RSFSR)

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The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, or RSFSR, formed on October 25, (November 7 by the later adopted Gregorian calendar), 1917, was one of the four original republics in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) when the latter was founded by treaty in December 1922. The RSFSR's establishment was later confirmed in the 1924 constitution. The other three were Ukraine, Belorussia (now called Belarus), and Transcaucasia (divided in 1940 into Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia). Even after ten more republics were added, for a total of fifteen republics, the RSFSR remained the largest, with over half the population and three quarters of the USSR's territory (6,591,000 square miles). Moscow was the capital of both the RSFSR and the USSR as a whole. Situated in Eastern Europe and North Asia, the RSFSR was surrounded on the east, north, and northwest by the Pacific, Arctic, and Atlantic Oceans. It had frontiers in the northwest with Norway and Finland, in the west with Poland and the three Baltic republics (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia), and in the south with China and Outer Mongolia and the Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine. In the new Soviet Union, which geographically replaced the old Russian Empire, the name Russia was not officially

used. Lenin and other Bolshevik authorities intended to blend the national and the international, i.e. to recognize each nationality by granting autonomy to national groups, while binding these groups together in a higher union and allowing new groups to enter regardless of historic frontiers. In 1922 the expectation of world revolution was still alive. Thus, the founding of the USSR – and the RSFSR within it – was a decisive step toward uniting the workers of all countries into one World Soviet Socialist Republic.

Although Lenin supported national self-determination as a force to undermine the tsarist empire, he adopted federalism rather late, as a response to Ukrainian and Georgian attempts to establish truly independent republics. The Red Army crushed these attempts in 1920-1, but such use of brute force and the specter of Great Russian chauvinism troubled Lenin. He and others pressed for the federalization not only of the sovereign republics within the USSR, but also the federalization of the RSFSR. By 1960 the RSFSR consisted of 15 “autonomous soviet socialist republics” (ASSRs), 6 territories (*krai*), 49 regions (*oblast*), 6 autonomous oblasts, and 10 national districts (*okrug*). The federal structure undoubtedly gave some dignity, self-respect, and sense of equal cooperation to many of the numerous nationalities.

In the late 1980s, partly due to the “perestroika,” “glasnost,” and “new thinking” (*novomyshlenie*) policies of the incumbent General Secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet republics - including and especially the RSFSR - began to challenge the legislative authority of the Soviet Communist Party and the “Moscow center.” By October 1990, fourteen republics had passed declarations of either

independence or sovereignty over USSR laws. The RSFSR's declaration of sovereignty and the rising popularity of Boris Yeltsin (elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR in May 1990 and then President of the RSFSR in June 1991) were key factors in prompting Gorbachev to attempt to replace the original 1922 union treaty with a new document giving the republics more power. This in turn prompted hardliners in the Kremlin to stage a coup in August 1991. When it failed, Yeltsin's power and influence eclipsed Gorbachev's. Rather than declare Russia's independence, Yeltsin convened with leaders of Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan in Alma Ata on December 21, 1991 to form an expanded "Commonwealth of Independent States," declare the nullification of the 1922 union treaty, and announce the official extinction of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev publicly confirmed the latter on December 25, 1991. The RSFSR is now called the Russian Federation.

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