This Moscow statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky (top) was toppled by protesters in 1991 (bottom).

“Iron Felix” Dzerzhinsky was a brutal man. Under his direction, hundreds of thousands of people were killed during the Russian Revolution of 1917. The revolution destroyed the czarist empire of Russia, replacing it with a new state called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or Soviet Union, in 1922.

The new government controlled the separate republics that made up the Soviet Union, and it chose Iron Felix to set up a secret police force that worked to destroy all opposition. Under Dzerzhinsky, the secret police arrested millions of people who were suspected of being disloyal. A statue of Dzerzhinsky outside the secret police headquarters in Moscow, the Soviet capital, reminded people that the police were always watching.

In the 1980s, the Soviet government faced serious challenges to its authority. In the summer of 1991, an angry crowd attacked the statue of Iron Felix, cheering wildly as the symbol of fear tumbled. By year’s end, the government had fallen as well, and the Soviet Union was no more.

Fifteen new nation-states formed out of the ruins of the Soviet empire. The term nation-state combines two ideas. The first, nation, refers to a group of people who share a common history and culture. Another term for people with such a shared identity is ethnic group. The second, state, refers to a political unit that controls a fixed territory. A nation-state is a country whose people mostly share a common identity.

In this lesson, you will read about the Soviet Union and five of the nation-states that replaced it. You will also find out what helps a new nation-state succeed or fail.
1. The Geographic Setting

Voting in a New Nation-State
Every year an organization called Freedom House rates countries on how free they are. Freedom House looks at how well a country protects two kinds of rights. The first is political rights, such as the right to vote or run for office. The second is civil rights, including the right to speak and worship freely. Freedom House rates a country as free, partly free, or not free.

The Soviet Union was an enormous country, covering more than half of Europe and nearly two-fifths of Asia. In area, it was almost two and a half times larger than the United States. It had the third largest population in the world, behind China and India.

From Superpower to Failed State From 1945 to 1991, the Soviet Union was one of the world’s two great superpowers. (The United States was the other.) Its armed forces were the largest in the world, and it possessed a fearsome nuclear arsenal. The Soviet Union also took the lead in space exploration for much of this period.
In 1991, however, this superpower collapsed, making the Soviet Union the world’s largest failed state. The question is why. One way to answer this question is to compare the Soviet Union with a successful nation-state.

**Features of Successful Nation-States** Many factors affect the success of a nation-state, but five are critical. Those factors are security, political freedom, economic growth, quality of life, and national unity.

The most important job of a nation-state is to keep its people safe. A successful state is strong enough to protect its people from foreign enemies, and its police work to keep people safe from crime. While the Soviet Union had a powerful army for defense, its secret police made people feel less, not more, secure.

A successful nation-state also protects the rights and freedoms of its citizens. In a free country, people choose their leaders by voting freely in honest and fair elections, without fear of arrest. Elected leaders usually have the authority that comes from strong public support. By contrast, the Soviet Union was ruled by dictators—leaders who governed by force without the people’s consent.

A successful nation-state uses its resources and relative location to promote economic growth. Its gross domestic product (GDP)—the total value of goods and services produced in the country—rises over time. As GDP rises, incomes rise, and as incomes rise, poverty declines. In the Soviet Union, GDP rose slowly or not at all.

A successful nation-state also tries to improve its people’s quality of life. The government works to ensure that its citizens have adequate and safe food, clean water, and good medical care. As people live healthier lives, life expectancy increases and infant mortality rates decrease. In the Soviet Union, however, quality of life did not improve for many people.

Successful nation-states inspire patriotism, or love of country, in their people, encouraging citizens to work to make the country succeed. Similar to patriotism is nationalism—feelings of pride and loyalty toward one’s nation. Nationalism can help to create a sense of unity, but in a country made of many nations, like the Soviet Union, people may express loyalty to their own group. This can sometimes work against unity within the nation-state.

By 1991, the groups within the Soviet Union became increasingly nationalistic. At that point, many decided that they would rather establish, or in some cases re-establish, their nations as independent nation-states than remain part of a failing Soviet Union.
**Geoterms**

**ethnic group** a group of people who share a unique culture and identity

**nation** a large group of people who share a common history and culture. Not all nations have their own government or control a territory. Note that in common use, the word *nation* often means a country or nation-state.

**nationalism** [feelings of loyalty and pride toward one’s nation or ethnic group. Nationalism sometimes includes the belief that one’s nation or group is better than all others.

**nation-state** an independent state, or country, whose people mostly share a common identity

**state** a political unit that controls a particular territory

### 2. Kazakhstan: A Central Asian Giant

The nation-state of Kazakhstan is a Central Asian giant surrounded by other giants. To the southeast lies China, to the north lies Russia, and to the west lies the Caspian Sea.

**An Arid Land with Many Resources** While much of Kazakhstan is too arid for agriculture, the northern region and some irrigated areas in the south yield abundant crops. Kazakhs also raise cattle, goats, poultry, pigs, and sheep.

Kazakhstan’s greatest resource is its minerals. It has large deposits of coal, lead, copper, iron, and zinc, but its most significant mineral resource is oil. Kazakhstan has some of the world’s largest oil reserves, and oil production is a major part of its economy. In 2015, oil accounted for nearly half of Kazakhstan’s exports, much of which went to Europe and China. The construction of pipelines across Kazakhstan has enabled oil to flow to the rapidly developing cities of China. However, the Kazakh economy has suffered in recent years because of its dependence on exporting resources.

**Difficulties Facing Kazakhstan’s Future** Kazakhstan has had stable rule since it became independent. Its president since 1989 has been Nursultan Nazarbayev. Nazarbayev has successfully led the country through ethnic, religious, and economic troubles. However, he has also limited rights, particularly freedom of speech, and been accused of corruption.
Given President Nazarbayev’s age—he is around 80 years old—there are concerns about what will happen to Kazakhstan when he can no longer rule. If government officials fight to become the ruler or a popular rebellion occurs, the country could become unstable.

In addition to concerns about the future of the government, Kazakhstan faces serious environmental problems. Under Soviet rule, poor irrigation methods damaged farmland, and pesticides seeped into the water supply. Factories released toxic waste. Some of these agricultural and industrial practices have continued in independent Kazakhstan. The Soviets also carried out secret nuclear weapons testing, and many people still suffer serious health problems as a result.

Looking ahead, Kazakhstan’s survival will depend on several factors. One factor is diversifying its economy so that it is less dependent on natural resources. Another is solving its environmental problems and therefore improving the quality of life of its citizens. A third factor is ensuring its political stability while expanding the rights of its people. If it can succeed at meeting all three challenges, Kazakhstan may face a bright future.

Kazakh Herders
For centuries, the Kazakhs were mainly nomads, people who move from place to place. They raised sheep, goats, cattle, and horses for meat, wool, and hides. They traveled hundreds of miles each year in search of pasture for their herds. A few Kazakhs still follow this ancient way of life.
3. Azerbaijan: Where Europe Meets Asia

Together, the nation-states of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan are known as the Caucasus because of the steep Caucasus Mountains that tower over them. This region is one of the world’s great crossroads, where Europe meets Asia. Azerbaijan’s location and resources hold the keys to its future.

A Country Rich in Oil

Azerbaijan’s huge deposits of oil are its greatest source of wealth and its number one export. In fact, companies in Azerbaijan were pioneers in the oil-refining industry in the 19th century. Today the capital city of Baku, with the finest harbor on the Caspian Sea, is the center of Azerbaijan’s oil industry.

During Soviet rule, oil pipelines sent all of Azerbaijan’s oil to neighboring Russia. When the Soviet Union collapsed, however, so did its hold on Azerbaijan. The new country was then free to sell its oil anywhere in the world.

Since 1991, Azerbaijan has signed agreements with many foreign oil companies. Pipeline construction has enabled Azerbaijan to move its oil to customers outside of Russia. Azerbaijan’s economic success has depended on new markets for its oil. However, like Kazakhstan, it has faced economic challenges because of low oil prices. In turn, this has damaged the nation’s financial sector.

Ethnic Warfare Clouds the Future

Ethnic conflicts between groups in Azerbaijan and neighboring Armenia have been a major obstacle to progress for the nation-state. The Azeris are the main ethnic group in Azerbaijan, making up over 90 percent of the population. Most Azeris are Muslim.

The Azeris and the Armenians have a long history of conflict. Less than 2 percent of the population in Azerbaijan is Armenian, and most Armenians are Christians. However, the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan is primarily Armenian. The people of this region want independence from Azerbaijan, and in 1992, war broke out between the two groups. Thousands of people were killed, and almost a million people fled from the fighting. Though a cease-fire was called in 1994, the problem was not solved. Violence continues to this day and threatens the stability of Azerbaijan.
A Wealth of Oil
Oil is Azerbaijan’s most important resource. Drills are even set up in and around the capital of Baku. The country has enough oil to fill 7 billion barrels. One barrel of oil produces about 19 gallons of gasoline.

4. Belarus: Between Europe and Russia
Belarus means “white Russia.” No one knows why the color is part of the country’s name, but there are many theories. It might refer to the clothing that is part of the national dress, the pale skin of those who lived there, or local mythology. “Rus” comes from the Rus people who settled in the region in the 9th century. Belarus sits to the west of Russia and to the east of Europe.

A Landlocked Country of Many Lakes This nation of rolling plains and dense forests is landlocked, meaning it is surrounded entirely by land, with no access to the sea. Long ago, glaciers scraped across its plains, creating the 11,000 lakes that dot the Belarusian landscape.
In the past, the Belarusian economy was based on agriculture and logging. Both activities remain important today, but about one-fifth of the country’s farmland and forestland can no longer be used. This land was poisoned when the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, just four miles from the Ukraine-Belarus border, exploded in 1986. Much of this large area will never be safe for farming or logging again.

**Belarus Looks East to Russia** Belarus developed greatly under Soviet rule. The Soviet government helped to increase manufacturing and industry and to clear and drain the land for farming. By the time the Soviet Union collapsed, Belarus had the second highest GDP of the 15 republics.

During the Soviet era, Belarus was greatly influenced by Russia. Although around 8% of the population is Russian, the Russian language is still spoken by more than 70% of the Belarusian people. By comparison, Belarusian is spoken by less than 25%.

As an independent nation, Belarus has maintained its close ties to Russia, but much of the relationship is now based on trade. Most of its foreign trade is with Russia, and it depends on Russian gas and oil to run its industries. Because of Belarus’s dependence on Russia, its economy has declined whenever Russia’s economy encounters downturns.

Russia remains Belarus’s closest ally, but relations between them are not always smooth. For example, Belarus has had concerns about Russian influence and control, especially since Russia seized Crimea, which had been part of Ukraine. Also, the economic downturn has prompted Belarus to try to improve economic relations from the West. Belarus must balance its relationship with Russia and its growing ties to the West.

**Industry in Belarus**

Much of Belarus’s industry is centered on machinery for agriculture, and the country produces around 10 percent of the world’s tractors. The largest tractor company continues to be owned by the Belarusian government and has struggled because of global competition.
5. Lithuania: One of Three Baltic States

Three former republics of the Soviet Union—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—are known as the Baltic States. They line the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. Since independence, Lithuania and the other Baltic States have allied with the West rather than with Russia.

Lithuania Looks West to Europe Lithuania has a long history of unity, having come together as a nation around 1200. With a strong sense of nationalism, Lithuania was the first republic of the Soviet Union to declare its independence as a nation-state in 1990.

Since their independence from Soviet rule, the Lithuanian people have reformed their political system. They have looked toward Europe for their models, and today they have a democratic government with leaders chosen in free and fair elections.

Lithuania also sought to join the European community economically. In 2004, Lithuania became a member of the European Union (EU) and adopted the euro as its currency in 2015. Lesson 14 explores the EU in more detail.

Additionally, Lithuania joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Members of NATO promise to defend each other if attacked by another country. By joining NATO and the EU, Lithuanians hope to create a future of peace and prosperity.

A Transformed Economy Under Soviet rule, agriculture was a major part of the Lithuanian economy. However, it has declined since then and now accounts for around 3 percent of the country’s GDP. Today, the most significant sections of the Lithuanian economy include manufacturing and services, especially information technology services. Although the country has allied with the West, Russia is still its largest trading partner.

Lithuania has limited mineral resources. The Lithuanians mine limestone, gravel, sand, and clay to make cement, glass, and ceramics. But fossil fuels and metals are in short supply.
The First Independent Republic
In January 1990, Lithuanians took to the streets to protest a visit from the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and to demand independence from the Soviet Union.

6. Russia: The Largest Nation on Earth
Imagine observing from space as your country breaks apart and then ceases to exist. That’s what Soviet astronaut Sergei Krikalev did in 1991. He flew up to the Mir space station as a citizen of the Soviet Union. However, while he circled Earth 16 times a day, the Soviet Union collapsed. When he finally set foot on land, he found himself still a citizen of the largest nation on Earth, but this nation was now Russia.

Rich Resources in a Vast Land Although Russia is not as large as the Soviet Union was, it is still huge. It has vast forests and large deposits of coal and minerals, with its most important resources being oil and natural gas. Because of its cold climate, however, less than 8 percent of Russia’s land is suitable for farming.
During Soviet rule, the government owned and operated the country’s farms, factories, and businesses. When Soviet rule ended, the government sold these factories and businesses. However, the Russian people did not benefit from these sales. Powerful political leaders and their friends grabbed the best businesses for themselves.

Today most Russian businesses are privately run, but they are not necessarily run well. Many factories that the government sold were run down and in need of modernization, but often the new owners could not afford to make changes. Other businesses made goods of such poor quality that no one wanted to buy them. As a result, many businesses failed.

In spite of its challenges, Russia’s economy grew during the late 1990s and through the 2000s. Oil exports were a big reason for this growth, but they have also hurt the country. The Russian economy has been dependent on oil exports and suffered greatly when oil prices have declined.

**FSirts.t PBrasooff’s Cathedral**

Ivan the Terrible, the first czar of all Russia, built St. Basil’s Cathedral. Legend says that when the church was finished, Ivan ordered its architect to be blinded. This, the czar hoped, would prevent him from ever creating anything so beautiful again. However, the architect did go on to design another cathedral.

**The Challenges Facing Russians Today** Life is not easy in Russia. The crime rate is high. The cost of living is expensive, and living standards have declined for many. The nation faces a major challenge due to negative population growth. Alcohol abuse and pollution are also big concerns that threaten people’s health.

Ethnic nationalism and religious divisions have caused problems in Russia as well. Russia’s 142 million people come from dozens of ethnic groups, not all of which are pleased to still be a part of Russia. In addition, most Russians belong to the Russian Orthodox Church, but many follow other religions, such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and non-Orthodox forms of Christianity. The law limits the activities of some religious groups. For example, some of them are not allowed to distribute religious literature or operate religious schools.
In an area of southwest Russia known as Chechnya, opposition to Russian rule led to outright rebellion in the 1990s. During the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a group of Chechen leaders declared independence from Russia. In 1994, Russian tanks rolled into Chechnya to crush the independence movement. More than 100,000 Chechens died in the two wars that followed. Russia ultimately declared victory in 2009. However, separatists from Chechnya, as well as from other Russian republics, have continued to fight for independence and have committed terrorist attacks that have killed thousands.

Summary

In this lesson, you learned about five factors that affect whether a nation-state will succeed or fail. These factors are security, political freedom, economic growth, quality of life, and national unity. You have also seen how nationalism can unite a country or tear it apart.

Each of the 15 nation-states that emerged from the former Soviet Union has its own story. Moreover, each has had varying degrees of success. Some have attained stability that has made ongoing success likely, whereas others face challenges that may affect their long-term viability. The ability of the former Soviet republics to address these issues will ultimately help decide their futures. Those that fail to address challenges related to security, political freedom, economic growth, quality of life, and national unity may face a fate similar to the Soviet Union’s.

The world is always changing, with empires rising and collapsing and new nations starting and failing. Think about these changes as you look at the map showing the rise of new nations in the next section. Which nations will succeed? And which are likely to fail?

Air Pollution in Russia

During Soviet rule, new factories were built across Russia, but little attention was paid to pollution. Although Russia now has laws to protect the environment, the government does not do much to enforce them and spends little on the