The USSR in the Gorbachev Era: Perestroika, Glasnost, and Upheaval

The 1980s were a time of great change in the Soviet Union. The USSR saw the deaths of three of its leaders in quick succession. The country also found itself embroiled in a prolonged war in Afghanistan, which strained the stagnating Soviet economy. When Mikhail Gorbachev assumed the premiership in 1985, he embarked on a series of reforms that would bring new freedoms to Soviet citizens and improve relations with the United States and Western Europe. However, these events would ultimately result in the dissolution of the USSR and the end of communist rule in Eastern Europe at the end of the decade.

REFORM AND THE END OF USSR

By the 1980s, the Soviet Union faced a number of internal problems. Its economy had stagnated, its leadership was rapidly aging, and corruption was eating away at society. A costly war in Afghanistan also complicated politics at home and abroad.

When Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary at the relatively youthful age of 54, he recognized the need to modernize the country. He embarked on a series of reforms, most notably glasnost and perestroika, which introduced limited free-market policies and reduce restrictions on freedom of speech.

By the late 1980s, Soviet citizens were eagerly exchanging books, movies, and music that had previously been banned. The flow of information ushered in a period of cultural revival and sparked heated public debate about Soviet history, the atrocities of Joseph Stalin, and the effectiveness of communism — the founding philosophy of the USSR.

While freedom of speech rapidly opened up society, economic reform proved sluggish. Perestroika failed to energize the Soviet economy, and shortages of food and basic items became more commonplace.

In 1989, the Soviet Union held its first relatively free election since the country’s founding. That same year, communist dictatorships in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and other Eastern European countries began to collapse. Those events, along with economic discontent, awakened nationalist sentiments throughout the Soviet Union, resulting in its dissolution in 1991.

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Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987.
Although Gorbachev enjoyed widespread goodwill in the West, he became increasingly unpopular in the Soviet Union due to the worsening economy. He was also seen as unwilling to fully implement radical reform, preferring incremental changes to the political and economic systems. Economic reform and improved foreign relations brought new Western brands to the USSR. McDonald’s, for example, opened its first restaurant in Moscow in 1990.

The USSR consisted of 15 union republics, all of which are independent states today. Three of them — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — are now members of the European Union. The Eastern European countries of the former Warsaw Pact and the three Baltic states that gained independence from the Soviet Union eventually joined the NATO alliance, much to Moscow’s frustration. When revolutions broke out in the communist countries of Eastern Europe in 1989, Gorbachev chose not to intervene with military force. The regimes soon crumbled, and the former Soviet satellites held democratic elections that brought new leaders to power. Although Gorbachev opposed NATO membership for a unified Germany, the USSR did not interfere when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and West Germany absorbed the formerly communist East Germany.

Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev meet in the White House.

USEFUL LINKS
CIA World Factbook:
BBC Country Page:
National Geographic:
Kyiv Post English

QUICK FACTS
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- The Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989, allowing East Germans and West Germans to travel freely across the border ahead of official reunification in 1990. The event is remembered as one of the most powerful symbols of the end of the Cold War.
- Gorbachev’s decision to break with his predecessors and not use Soviet military force to keep Eastern European communist regimes in power contributed to the success of pro-democracy movements in the late 1980s.

More resources for educators are available on the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies website.
By 1991 the Soviet Union was facing growing internal turmoil. The demise of communist regimes in countries bordering the Soviet Union gave momentum to independence groups in the USSR’s 15 republics. Gorbachev’s attempts to bring democratic reform to the Soviet Union and to establish a new treaty that would decentralize power to the republics alarmed hardline members of the Communist Party.

On August 19, 1991, a group of hardliners locked Gorbachev in his vacation home on the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea. Explaining that he had fallen ill, the hardliners hoped to take control of the Soviet Union and suspend Gorbachev’s reforms. The attempted coup quickly collapsed in the face of civil resistance and poor organization, and Gorbachev was set free. However, the failed coup served to signal the growing weakness of the Soviet state and to speed up the forces that would unravel the Soviet Union.

A few months later, the leaders of the Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian republics met in Belarus where they signed a document declaring that the Soviet Union had ceased to exist and formed a loose alliance called the Commonwealth of Independent States. On December 25, 1991, sensing he had lost control of his country, Gorbachev announced his resignation as president and handed over power to Boris Yeltsin.

The Gorbachev era gave new freedoms to Soviet citizens and brought the Cold War to a peaceful conclusion, but in the process the USSR collapsed and the 15 independent states that emerged set out on an uncertain path.

**AN ATTEMPTED COUP**

**DISCUSSION IDEAS**

What led to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991? Was its demise preventable? If so, what could Gorbachev have done?

Was the dissolution of the Soviet Union a good or a bad thing? Discuss the pros and cons of independence for the 15 union republics.

Instruct students to imagine themselves as Soviet citizens in the 1980s. Ask them to explain how their lives changed between Gorbachev’s rise to power and the August coup of 1991.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**


“Glasnost and Perestroika” — video by Curriculum Bites from the BBC. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9XtYPy4kM8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9XtYPy4kM8)

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