

Gorbachev and the fall of the Soviet Empire

Between 1985 to 1991 Mikhail Gorbachev was the leader of the USSR. In 1989 Soviet control of Eastern Europe collapsed. In 1991 the Soviet Union fell apart.

Was Gorbachev responsible for the collapse of communism in Europe?

Focus

Look at the following information about the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe before Gorbachev came to power. What were the long-term causes for the collapse of communism?

The standard of living

In the early 1960s, communists had been convinced that communism was better than capitalism and that the communist states would soon produce more goods than in the USA and Western Europe. By the 1980s it was clear that communism had failed to deliver high living standards. Most people in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were much poorer than the people of Western Europe. Some basic goods, such as sugar, were rationed. The gap between communist and capitalist economies was growing all the time. The Soviet Union and its allies were not able to compete with the West in the new industries of the 1980s – computers and telecommunications.

By the 1980s Soviet farming had failed. The Soviet Union had rich land at its disposal but it could not produce enough food to feed its people. Many people worked on the land but they were very inefficient. In the 1980s farming employed over 20 per cent of the workforce, compared with 3 per cent in the USA. On average each American farmer produced seven times more food than each Soviet farmer. As a result the USSR had to import millions of tons of grain, much of it from the USA.

SOURCE A



Leonid Brezhnev.

Corruption and the decline of communism

The founders of communism promised a new kind of state based on fairness and equality. Under the leadership of Brezhnev, Soviet communism moved a long way from these ideals and became more corrupt. As a result ordinary people had less respect for communism. It was widely known that the family of Brezhnev was corrupt. Leading communists had luxurious country houses or 'dachas' built for themselves. According to one joke that circulated in the Soviet Union at the time, Brezhnev showed his own mother round a new luxury house that he had just had built; his mother commented 'It's wonderful, Leonid. But what happens if the communists come back to power?'

A second Cold War

With the communist economies in trouble, the cost of the Cold War became more and more unbearable. The price of weapons was constantly increasing. By the 1980s a single bomber cost the same as 200 bombers built during the Second World War. America and its allies could afford these higher costs because their economies were doing well. The Soviet Union could only keep up with the USA by diverting a huge proportion of its national income to defence. People suffered even lower living standards as tanks were built instead of cars and televisions.

The cost of the Cold War began to increase when the US President, Ronald Reagan, came to power in 1981. He rejected the idea of detente and encouraged a policy of confrontation with the Soviets. He took the view that communism was wicked and needed to be approached with great firmness. Reagan increased military spending and challenged the USSR to join a new arms race.

The early 1980s have been called the 'Second Cold War' because there was heightened tension between the USA and the Soviet Union. The competition between the superpowers was symbolised by Reagan's 'Star Wars' project (officially known as SDI: the Strategic Defence Initiative). This project involved research into ways of giving America nuclear superiority by destroying Soviet missiles in space.

War in Afghanistan

Brezhnev made a big mistake in December 1979. Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan to support its communist government. The invasion was widely criticised and lost the USSR many friends. It led to a widespread boycott of the Olympic Games that were held in Moscow. Afghanistan was a Muslim country and the USSR was criticised by much of the Islamic world. The Afghan rebels received help from the USA and the invasion encouraged Reagan to take a tough anti-Soviet stance when he became president in 1980.

The Soviet military action was a failure. The official Afghan army was not strong enough to win alone and once the Soviet forces had become involved it became very difficult to withdraw. With Soviet help the Afghan government controlled Kabul, the capital, and other large towns, but the rebels controlled much of the countryside. More and more Soviet troops were needed to prop up an unpopular government. In the early 1980s there were about 125,000 Soviet troops in the country.

The situation of the Soviets in Afghanistan was similar to that of the Americans in Vietnam a decade earlier. The 10-year war led to the death of about 15,000 Soviet troops. It also damaged the Soviet economy: one estimate is that the war cost the USSR about \$8 billion dollars a year. The last Soviet troops finally left Afghanistan in February 1989.

SOURCE B



Soviet troops fighting anti-communist forces in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan damaged the international reputation of the Soviet Union.

Andropov and Gorbachev

The ideas of Gorbachev were not completely original. By 1980 there were many younger, idealistic communists who were disgusted by corruption and wanted to reform the system. Several reformers gathered around the head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov. Gorbachev was one of this group. Brezhnev died in 1982 and Andropov became the new Soviet leader. Within a few months he became desperately ill and he died in February 1984. Although he was not in power long, Andropov introduced some policies that were later developed by Gorbachev:

- > He called for an end to the arms race, and offered to reduce the Soviet stockpile of weapons in return for American reductions.
- > He attacked corruption at home.

Andropov made a number of offers to Reagan. One of these was revolutionary – this was a plan to abandon the Brezhnev Doctrine and to promise never again to invade other Warsaw Pact countries. Reagan did not take this offer seriously and it came to nothing. Although Andropov had many original ideas he did little to provide more freedom for the people of the Soviet Union. As the KGB Chairman from 1967–82 he had played a key role in the persecution of dissidents, nationalists and different religious groups. After the death of Andropov, the new leader of the Soviet Union was Konstantin Chernenko. He had little interest in reform. Like Andropov, Chernenko did not live long enough to have much impact. He died in 1985 and his replacement as General Secretary was the reformer Mikhail Gorbachev. He introduced policies of 'glasnost' or 'openness' and 'perestroika' or 'economic restructuring'.

One critical difference between Gorbachev and Andropov was in the way glasnost gave new freedom to the people of the Soviet Union. This was a radical change. Control of ideas had always been a central part of the Soviet system. Under glasnost, people were told an increasing amount about the atrocities committed by the government when Stalin had been in power. Thousands of political prisoners were released. The leading dissident Andrei Sakharov was released in 1986.

THE GORBACHEV AGENDA

- > The economy was failing. The communist system needed to be reformed but not replaced. This would be done by a process called 'perestroika' or 'restructuring'.
- > Perestroika would require a new honesty on the part of people in the Soviet Union. Free speech should be allowed. There should be a new spirit of 'glasnost' or 'openness'. There should be an end to the persecution of the dissidents.
- > Corruption must be stamped out.
- > A key cause of the economic problems was the amount of money being spent on defence. To reduce this the Soviet Union should:
 - pull out of Afghanistan
 - negotiate arms reductions with the USA
 - stop interfering in the affairs of other communist countries.

Another distinctive feature of the Gorbachev leadership was the energy and imagination with which he pursued the idea of disarmament with the US president, Reagan. Unlike Andropov he was able to persuade Reagan that he genuinely wanted an end to the Cold War. The two men met, face-to-face, at a series of summit meetings. The main focus for these discussions was arms control. The result was a major disarmament treaty in 1987. Both the USA and the Soviet Union agreed to remove medium-range nuclear missiles from Europe within three years.

Withdrawal from Afghanistan

As soon as he was in office, Gorbachev began to explore ways of ending the war in Afghanistan without destroying the communist government in that country. In February 1988 he announced publicly that the Soviet army was going to pull out of Afghanistan. The withdrawal began in May 1988. By February 1989 the last Soviet troops had left.

Failure at home

Gorbachev had many triumphs in foreign policy but he was less successful at home. By encouraging free speech, Gorbachev simply brought problems out into the open. He wanted to make the Soviet system of centrally planned production more efficient. This did not happen. The levels of corruption and inefficiency in the economy were too great. The managers of the Soviet economy saw the reforms as a threat to their jobs and they blocked the changes.

>> Activity

- 1 What similarities and differences were there between the policies of Andropov and those of Gorbachev?
- 2 What can you learn from Sources C and D about the motives of Gorbachev?

SOURCE C

Gorbachev 1987:

I want to put an end to all the rumours in the West, and point out once again that all our reforms are socialist. We are looking within socialism, rather than outside it, for the answers to all the questions that arise. Those who hope that we shall move away from the socialist path will be greatly disappointed.

SOURCE D

In 1992, after he had lost power, Gorbachev tried to make sense of his years in control:

I knew that an immense task of transformation awaited me. Engaged in the exhausting arms race, the country, it was evident, was at the end of its strength. Economic mechanisms were functioning more and more poorly. Production figures were slumping. Scientific and technical developments were cancelled out by an economy totally in the hands of the bureaucracy. The people's standard of living was clearly declining. Corruption was gaining ground. We wanted to reform by launching a democratic process. It was similar to earlier reform attempts.

SOURCE E



Gorbachev and Reagan, 1987. The two men established a warm personal relationship and agreed to substantial disarmament.

The end of the Brezhnev Doctrine

Another foreign policy breakthrough came in December 1988, when Gorbachev spoke at the United Nations. He announced huge cuts in the Soviet armed forces. Gorbachev also made it clear that the Brezhnev Doctrine was now abandoned: the countries of Eastern Europe could do what they liked. There would be no more Soviet tanks rolling into Prague or Budapest.

SOURCE F

Gorbachev, speaking to the United Nations on 7 December 1988:

Force or the threat of force neither can nor should be instruments of foreign policy. The principle of the freedom of choice is mandatory. Refusal to recognise this principle will have serious consequences for world peace. To deny a nation the choice, regardless of any excuse, is to upset the unstable balance that has been achieved. Freedom of choice is a universal principle. It knows no exception.

SOURCE G



The collapse of European communism was symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall, November 1989.

1989: year of revolution

When it became clear that the Soviet Union was no longer ready to use force to control its Empire, there was rapid change. In May 1989 the Hungarian government opened the frontier with Austria; there was now a gap in the Iron Curtain. In June free elections were held in Poland. Solidarity won and in August led a new non-communist government. Gorbachev expressed support for a peaceful hand-over of power. The rolling back of communism in Eastern Europe had begun. Many young East Germans made their way to Hungary and passed through Austria into West Germany. This made a nonsense of the Berlin Wall.

In October 1989 Gorbachev visited East Germany for the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the state. Behind the scenes Gorbachev explained to East German leaders that he had no intention of using Russian force to stop reform. A month later, on 10 November, the Berlin Wall was torn down. The most famous symbol of the Cold War had been destroyed. On 17 November a series of massive anti-communist demonstrations took place in Czechoslovakia. By early December the Czechoslovak communist

government had collapsed. On 21 December a revolution began in Romania. The Romanian dictator, Ceauşescu, was executed on Christmas Day. Throughout Eastern Europe there was no popular support for communism and, without the threat of Soviet tanks, communism fell apart. In 1990 the two halves of Germany were re-united and a single pro-Western state was established.

The last days of the USSR

After 1989 Gorbachev was in a difficult position. His plan to reform communism had failed. Communism had been rejected by Eastern Europe and different nationalities demanded independence from the Soviet Union. The call for independence was strongest in the Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. In Russia itself, the heart of the USSR, many people demanded an end to communism. On 4 February 1990, 250,000 people demonstrated in Moscow against communism.

With his plans in ruins Gorbachev responded by drawing back from reform and trying to make an alliance with old style, hard-line communists. On May Day 1990, demonstrators humiliated Gorbachev by shouting at him in public during the traditional communist march.

The rise of Yeltsin

Boris Yeltsin became the leader of the reformists. He had been a communist boss in the city of Moscow until he was dismissed in 1987 by Gorbachev because of his radical views. In May 1990 Yeltsin was elected President of Russia. The USSR was divided into separate republics and Russia was the largest of them. A month later Yeltsin left the communist party and joined forces with those who wanted to destroy Soviet communism. Gorbachev was losing control of events.

In the autumn of 1990 Gorbachev tried to stop the disintegration of the USSR by using force against nationalists in the Baltic republics. At the same time Gorbachev appointed more old-style communists to key positions of government. This new hard line from Gorbachev was not a success. He began to lose many of his long-standing friends and supporters. In December 1990 the Soviet Foreign Minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, resigned and complained of a move towards dictatorship. This was a great blow – Shevardnadze had been one of Gorbachev's allies for many years.

The fall of Gorbachev

The struggle for control of the USSR came to a head in 1991. Yeltsin attacked the power of the communist party in the daily life of Russian people. He banned the party from operating at all places of work. The Russian Parliament that Yeltsin controlled became more powerful and challenged the central government of Gorbachev. Gorbachev did not know which way to turn. In August 1991 a group of hard-line communists tried to seize power. They arrested Gorbachev and declared a state of emergency. The coup was opposed by Boris Yeltsin and it soon collapsed. After the coup, the authority of Gorbachev was damaged. In December 1991 the individual Soviet republics became independent and Gorbachev resigned as Soviet leader. The Soviet state, born in the 1917 revolution, no longer existed.

SOURCE H



Boris Yeltsin at the time of the 1991 coup. Yeltsin took power in Russia as the Soviet Union fell apart.

>> Activity

Explain the part that Gorbachev played in the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In your answer discuss:

- the long-term causes of the crisis for communism,
- the personal contribution of Gorbachev.