

# The Collapse of the Soviet Union

**Enduring Understanding:** You will understand the events that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union and other communist governments in Europe, including the growth of resistance movements in Eastern Europe, the policies of Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan, and the failures of communist economic systems.





In Eastern Europe, the growth of **resistance movements** led to the fall of communist governments in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In these nations, the desire for political rights led many citizens to protest against their communist governments. The economic systems of many of these nations were ineffective as production, income, and standard of living levels continued to decline. As citizens of these nations witnessed the political freedoms and comparatively better economic success of democratic governments in Europe, these protests intensified and defections from these nations increased.

### Section Review:

- 1) What led to the fall of communist governments in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s?
- 2) Why did defections from Eastern European countries increase?

In Poland, the labor union **Solidarity** opposed communist rule and demanded government recognition of their group. Led by **Lech Walesa**, Solidarity gained popularity through strikes and sit-ins as the government continued to struggle with economic issues. When free elections were held in April 1989, Lech Walesa was elected president.



Lech Walesa

### Section Review:

- 3) What is Solidarity?
- 4) Who was Lech Walesa and how did he become president of Poland?



In Hungary, many citizens fled to Western Europe in 1989 after cutting a hole in a fence that separated communist Hungary from the democratic west. As the hole continued to get larger, more and more citizens of Hungary and other communist nations including East Germany defected. The communist party in Hungary was overthrown in October 1989.

### Section Review:

- 5) When was communism overthrown in Hungary?

In East Germany, demands for political and economic rights increased. In November 1989, the **Berlin Wall** was torn down,

removing the symbol of division between communism and capitalism. After the collapse of the wall, West and East Germany were reunited into one democratic Germany. The collapse of the Berlin Wall reflected the changes happening throughout the Communist East in the late 1980s and early 1990s.



Tearing Down of the Berlin Wall



Tearing Down of the Berlin Wall

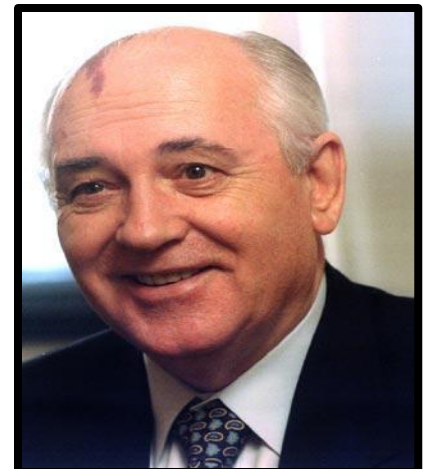
### Section Review:

- 6) What did the East Germans demand?
- 7) When was the Berlin Wall torn down?
- 8) What did the tearing down of the Berlin Wall symbolize?

The Soviet Union was the primary Communist nation throughout the Cold War. The continued expenses of supporting the spread of communism and the space and arms races caused serious economic problems. Decreasing levels of production, income, and standards of living within the Soviet Union made the failures of the communist economic system more apparent. Soviet citizens demanded changes and wanted more political rights. The Soviet Union was unable to bear the continued expense of stopping resistance movements.

A small group of reformers tried to come up with ideas on how to improve life in the Soviet Union. The group included **Mikhail Gorbachev**, who was the son of Russian peasants. He became the leader of the Soviet Union in 1985 and served as the last leader of the country. Gorbachev began to

move away from the totalitarian style of rule. He encouraged economic and social reforms, including **perestroika** (economic restructuring) that allowed for more decision-making and private ownership of businesses and **glasnost** (a policy of openness) that allowed more public participation and greater individual rights.

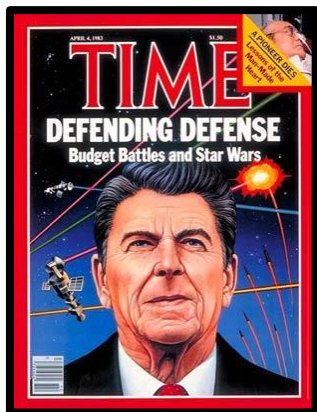


Mikhail Gorbachev

## Section Review:

- 9) What eventually caused the failure of communism in the Soviet Union?
- 10) Who was Mikhail Gorbachev and how were his economic views different from previous Soviet leaders?
- 11) Define:
  - a. perestroika –
  - b. glasnost –

**Ronald Reagan** was elected President of the United States in 1980. Reagan began his term as president in a defensive and hostile manner towards the Soviet Union so the Cold War sentiments remained high. In 1983 Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as “the evil empire.” The **Strategic Defense Initiative** (SDI) was proposed by Reagan that same year. The SDI continued the Cold War trend of competition and animosity between the superpowers. The program was designed to use ground and space systems to protect the United States from a possible nuclear attack.



In 1985, Reagan met Gorbachev face to face. The two began to work together easing the tensions of the Cold War. In 1987, Gorbachev and Reagan signed a treaty to reduce their numbers of nuclear weapons in an effort to end the arms race and to show greater cooperation between the two nations.

That same year Gorbachev introduced a policy called **democratization**, which was the process of creating a government elected by the people.

Allowing greater freedom to those within Soviet borders led various nationalist groups to call for independence which, in turn, led to rising ethnic tensions. In March 1990, Lithuania declared independence from the Soviet Union. Gorbachev ordered an economic blockade of the country in an attempt to persuade it to rejoin the Soviet Union. He eventually had to use force in early 1991 when the blockade proved ineffective. Tensions intensified in June 1991. Frustrated by economic difficulties and lack of political rights, the people of the USSR turned to **Boris Yeltsin** as the first directly elected president of the Russian Federation. Gorbachev remained president of the Soviet Union at this time. In August 1991, conservative communists unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow Gorbachev’s government and remove him from power. Following this unsuccessful coup, the Soviet party lost power. All fifteen Soviet republics declared independence, and agreed to form the **Commonwealth of Independent States** (CIS) as a loose federation of former Soviet states.



Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev

The formation of the CIS in December of 1991 was the official end of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev resigned as president of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991 and the Soviet Union was officially dissolved.

### **Section Review:**

- 12) Who was elected President of the United States in 1980?
- 13) What were Reagan's views regarding the Soviet Union?
- 14) How did Reagan describe the Soviet Union?
- 15) What was Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative?
- 16) Why and how did the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union change after 1985?
- 17) What is *democratization*?
- 18) What was the result of Gorbachev's democratization?
- 19) Who became the first directly elected president of the Russian Federation?
- 20) What caused the Soviet Party to lose power?

## Sources

**Cover Image:** "Pomnik Radziecki - Sadistic.pl." *Pomnik Radziecki - Sadistic.pl*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 June 2014.

**Image 1:** "The Lonely Conservative." *The Lonely Conservative*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 June 2014.

**Image 2:** "Europika." *Europika*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 June 2014.

**Image 3:** "The View East." *The View East*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 June 2014.

**Image 4:** N.p., n.d. Web.

**Image 5:** "Boston University Blogs." *Boston University Blogs RSS*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 June 2014.

**Image 6:** "TIME." *Time*. Time Inc., n.d. Web. 17 June 2014.

**Image 7:** "El Transcurso De Las Guerras En El Siglo XX." : *PERESTROIKA*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 June 2014.

**Image 8:** *Time*. Time, n.d. Web. 19 June 2014.

**Image 9:** "The Reagan Vision | For a Nuclear-Weapons-Free World." *The Reagan Vision RSS*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 June 2014.