PERESTROIKA AND GLASNOST

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When Mikhail S. Gorbachev (1931-) became general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985, he launched his nation on a dramatic new course. His dual program of “perestroika” (“restructuring”) and “glasnost” (“openness”) introduced profound changes in economic practice, internal affairs and international relations. Within five years, Gorbachev’s revolutionary program swept communist governments throughout Eastern Europe from power and brought an end to the Cold War (1945-91), the largely political and economic rivalry between the Soviets and the United States and their respective allies that emerged following World War II. Gorbachev’s actions also inadvertently set the stage for the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, which dissolved into 15 individual republics. He resigned from office on December 25, 1991.

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When Mikhail S. Gorbachev stepped onto the world stage in March 1985 as the new leader of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), it was immediately clear that he was different from his predecessors. Gorbachev, then 54, was significantly younger than the aging party members who had led the Communist superpower in previous decades–the last two of whom had seen their rule cut short by health problems. Hailing from a younger generation gave Gorbachev a new outlook on the challenges that faced his country.

Gorbachev realized that he had inherited significant problems. Even as the USSR vied with the United States for global political and military leadership, its economy was struggling, and its citizens were chafing under their relatively poor standard of living and lack of freedom. Those difficulties were also keenly felt in the Communist nations of Eastern Europe that were aligned with and controlled by the Soviets.

Gorbachev took a new approach toward addressing these problems: He introduced a reform program that embodied two overarching concepts. Perestroika, his restructuring concept, started with an overhaul of the top members of the Communist Party. It also focused on economic issues, replacing the centralized government planning that had been a hallmark of the Soviet system with a greater reliance on market forces. The accompanying concept of glasnost sought to ease the strict social controls imposed by the government. Gorbachev gave greater freedom to the media and religious groups and allowed citizens to express divergent views. By 1988, Gorbachev had expanded his reforms to include democratization, moving the USSR toward an elected form of government.

SLOWING THE ARMS RACE

Gorbachev’s internal reforms were matched by new approaches to Soviet foreign policy. Determined to end his country’s nuclear rivalry with the United States, he pursued negotiations with U.S. President [Ronald Reagan](http://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/ronald-reagan) (1911-2004). Although Reagan held strong anti-communist views and had intensified the [Cold War](http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war) by initiating a buildup of U.S. forces in the early 1980s, the two leaders managed to find common ground.

Gorbachev and Reagan took part in five summits between 1985 and 1988. Their discussions resulted in the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 1987, which brought about a major reduction in both nations’ weapons stockpiles. The productive dialogue was the result of fresh thinking on both sides, but progress on many points began with Gorbachev’s willingness to abandon long-held Soviet positions.

THE LIBERATION OF EASTERN EUROPE

The Gorbachev initiative that had the most far-reaching effects was his decision to abandon Soviet control of the Communist nations of Eastern Europe. Since [World War II](http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii), leaders of the USSR had viewed the maintenance of these states as essential to their nation’s security, and they had crushed anti-Soviet uprisings in Warsaw Pact countries (a group of eight Communist nations in Eastern Europe, including Poland and Hungary) that sought greater independence. However, just a year after taking power, Gorbachev oversaw reforms that loosened the Soviet grip on these states. Then, in a landmark December 1988 speech at the United Nations, he declared that all nations should be free to choose their own course without outside interference. To the amazement of millions, he capped this speech by announcing that the USSR would significantly reduce the number of troops and tanks that were based in the Eastern Bloc countries.

Gorbachev’s move had unintended consequences. He had hoped that his reforms would revitalize and modernize the Soviet Union. Instead, they unleashed social forces that brought about the dissolution of the USSR (which had been in existence since 1922). In 1989, Communist regimes fell in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania. By the end of that year, the [Berlin Wall](http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/berlin-wall) had been dismantled and discussions were under way that would result in the reunification of Germany in October 1990.

Gorbachev did not watch passively as these events unfolded. To the contrary, he adopted more conservative policies in 1990–the same year he received the Nobel Peace Prize. Despite his willingness to try new approaches, Gorbachev remained committed to the principles of socialism and determined to maintain the Soviet republics as one nation. In the end, however, his efforts to rein in the reform spirit he had turned loose were ineffective.

Angry hard-line Communists attempted to remove Gorbachev from power in August 1991 by staging a coup. The revolt failed due to the efforts of [Boris Yeltsin](http://www.history.com/topics/boris-yeltsin) (1931-2007), president of the Russian Republic, who emerged as the country’s most powerful political figure. However, before the end of the year, Yeltsin and other reformers succeeded in completely undoing the old order. The Soviet Union dissolved into 15 individual republics, and on December 25, 1991, Gorbachev resigned from the presidency of a nation that no longer existed.