

The End of the Cold War

Instability in the Soviet Union

From its creation in 1922 through the reign of Leonid Brezhnev in 1982, the Soviet Union had only five leaders. But the next three years would be a period of instability in Soviet leadership. In 1982, Yuri Andropov was chosen to lead the Soviet Union, but he died two years later. The next leader, Konstantin Chernenko, lived for only one year before he died in 1985. The Central Committee realized they needed to choose a younger leader to provide stability moving forward. The US President, Ronald Reagan, had been wanting to meet with a Soviet leader since his election in 1980 to discuss arms limitations, but he had been unable to hold such a summit because “they kept dying on me.” In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was chosen as the new leader. He was only 52 years old upon his appointment, making him the second-youngest leader in Soviet history. He believed that there was a massive need to reform the Soviet Union, but he was committed to preserving the Communist Party and the Soviet Union, hoping to oversee a period of revitalization and progress. Several factors would limit his ability to do so, and his response to crises would create controversy throughout the world and in the history books.



Mikhail Gorbachev

The Bleeding Wound: The Demise of the Soviet Union

In 1979, a Communist revolution took place in neighboring Afghanistan. The leader of the revolution was Hafizullah Amin, an Afghan communist that did not want to depend on the Soviet Union for assistance. Beliefs were circling that Amin wanted to improve relations with the West, something the Soviet Union could not allow so close to home. So, the Soviet Union marched across the border to assassinate Amin and replace him with a pro-Soviet communist. While the assassination was successful within weeks, the chaos and instability created by the assassination led to a war that lasted ten years and cost the Soviet Union billions of dollars. The war in Afghanistan had political consequences that would hurt the Soviet Union economically, but it did more to damage Soviet foreign policy objectives. Gorbachev called Afghanistan “our bleeding wound” and compared it to the American war in Vietnam.

As the war in Afghanistan escalated, the US provided weapons to the mujahidin, guerrilla fighters opposing both the Soviet Union and Amin. While the costs, both physically and fiscally, were high in Afghanistan, the effect it had on Gorbachev would

prove to be much greater. Afghanistan convinced him to abandon efforts to control the outer edges of the Soviet empire. While Gorbachev did not want to commit troops elsewhere after the war in Afghanistan, “It is clear he never calculated the costs of retreating.”[2] Leaders before Gorbachev had been willing to prop up Communist regimes in Europe through the use of violence; that policy went away with Gorbachev. He would no longer spend time and resources to help his allies in Eastern Europe. Along with two other policies, this non-interventionist approach would see the demise of the Soviet Union.

Glasnost and Perestroika

In 1986, a nuclear reactor near the city of Chernobyl suffered a meltdown, leading to the release of deadly radiation that spread throughout Europe. The Soviet government failed to report this breach, even failing to evacuate the city surrounding the plant for 36 hours. The Soviets denied the accident for a week, though radioactive spikes were detected in Sweden and, using the wind patterns, were traced back to the Soviet Union. The number of lives lost cannot be officially determined, but estimates range from 4,000 to 60,000 were killed due to diseases caused by the radiation.

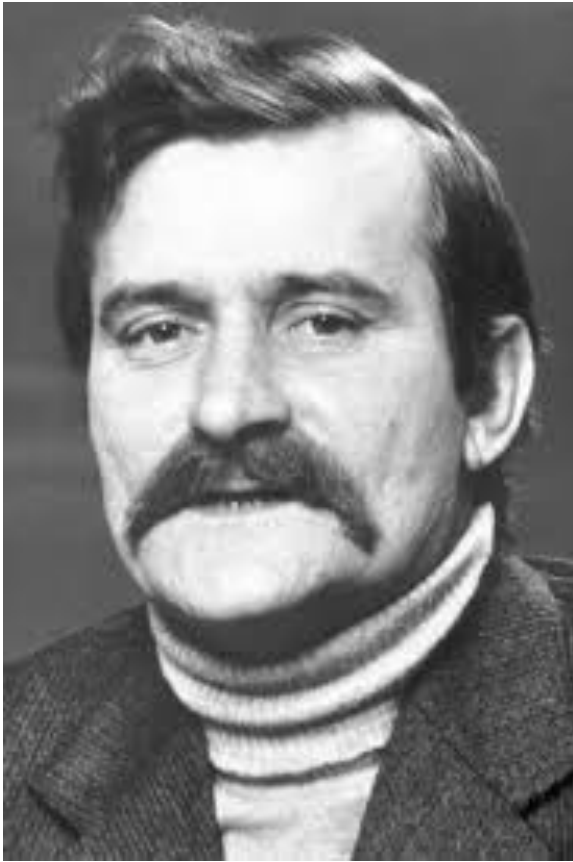
This catastrophe was unique both because it was the first major nuclear meltdown and it came on the heels of the institution of two new policies under Gorbachev: *perestroika* and *glasnost*. These policies were meant to strengthen the Soviet Union and make it more prosperous. Instead, they led to the destruction of the Soviet Union and the resignation of Mikhail Gorbachev. The first policy, *perestroika* (which means “restructuring”) was an effort to reform the Soviet economy and shift the focus of the government’s resources. Gorbachev allowed some businesses to determine their prices and products, which led to increased profits, a revolutionary idea in a communist country. Other sectors of the economy began to push for these same reforms, and other countries in the Soviet Union began to call for reform, as well.

Gorbachev also opened up his administration and his country to criticism through the policy of *Glasnost*. *Glasnost*, or openness, allowed for some freedom of speech and even some democratic elections throughout Russia and the Soviet Union. Newspapers began publishing articles critical of the government, including articles critical of the response to Chernobyl, Opposition movements throughout the region were empowered. After decades of repression, citizens were finally able to speak and gather in opposition to the Soviet government. Once they realized that Gorbachev would not send in tanks to put down the revolution (as his predecessors did), they took further actions to secure independence from the Soviet Union. By the end of 1989, six revolutions had broken out in Eastern Europe. While most Soviet leaders would send in tanks to put down the revolts, Gorbachev simply watched.

The Revolutions of 1989

The first domino to fall was in Poland. Due to increased criticism of the Polish Communist Party, an opposing party, Solidarity, was allowed to run for 100 of the seats available in the Polish Parliament. Of the 100 seats that Solidarity challenged, they won 99, and an independent won the other. This was an overwhelming and shocking defeat for the Communist Party of Poland, which did not understand the extent of its unpopularity. One year later, a Solidarity member who had been frequently jailed by the Polish government, Lech Walesa, became the president of an independent Poland.

Within months of the Polish revolution, other countries began to make changes. In Hungary, the revolution took a different form. Throughout the reign of Communism, travel to western countries had been restricted. People stuck behind the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe had no way of escaping communist rule. But in 1989, Hungary eased travel restrictions, allowing for the free movement of



Lech Walesa

people to Austria and, more broadly, to Western Europe. Within months, over one million people fled from Czechoslovakia and East Germany, escaping Eastern Europe through Hungary. This was both an embarrassment for those countries and a (typically) intolerable crack in the Soviet Union's attempt to keep control of the people.

To prevent more people from fleeing the country in this politically embarrassing way, the East German government began negotiations with West Germany about reopening travel between the two. On November 9th, the German governments agreed to allow free travel to commence, with East Germans just requesting that their citizens apply for a permit to leave. An East German official was handed a note announcing this change just moments before a press conference began. When questioned about travel between East and West Germany, he read the note out loud, leading to an uproar in the room. An Italian reporter asked when this new law would go into effect. Not knowing the answer, the spokesman said, "As I understand it, it goes into effect immediately... Without delay." Millions flocked to the Berlin Wall and began crossing over into West Berlin, while others showed up with hammers, picks, and even cranes to begin tearing down the wall. The Berlin Wall, a symbol of the Cold War and the partition of Germany after World War II, had fallen.

But the opening of the Wall and the subsequent deconstruction were not foreseen, even by the leaders of the two German governments. The day that the wall came down, Polish leader Lech Walesa told West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl that he believed the Berlin Wall would come down in the next few weeks. Kohl responded, "There are long historical processes going on and this will take many years."

This was the most alarming challenge to Soviet authority in its history. The fall of the Berlin Wall showed Gorbachev's lack of foresight; his response did not reflect that significance; upon speaking to the East German government after the fall of the wall, he said, "You made the right decision... the policy had to change." He failed to understand how the reunification of Germany, and the loss of a prized Soviet member state (East Germany) would impact the landscape of Eastern Europe.

In Bulgaria, Gorbachev played a major part in the overthrow of the regime. When told the Bulgarians wanted to make a change, he informed them, "This is entirely your business." When the Bulgarian leader called on Gorbachev to keep him in power, Gorbachev informed him that he was "neutral" on the subject, thus allowing the regime to be overthrown. While the Bulgarian Communist Party would remain in power, they did so through open elections for the first time, allowing the opposition a say in government policy.

The last revolution of 1989 would prove to be the most violent. In Romania, Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife, Elena, had ruled the country with an iron fist since 1965. Over the course of those 24 years, Romania had experienced famine, poverty, and political repression. Ceaușescu had used his possession to accumulate a great deal of wealth and pay off foreign debts at the expense of the lives of his people. On December 15, 1989, a small protest started due to the poor treatment of a priest in



Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu

Bucharest. This protest grew into a larger protest about the lack of food and kept growing as the people began chanting, “Down with Ceausescu.”

Nicolae and his wife were away on a trip to Iran when the protests started. Upon hearing of the protest, he flew home, perceiving it as a threat to his power. He demanded the army end the protest. On December 21st, Ceausescu attempted to restore order through a televised speech in front of a large crowd. As he spoke, the crowd began yelling at him and the army joined the protests. A confused Ceausescu waved to the crowd and retreated into his palace. The next day, protestors stormed

Ceausescu’s mansion as he escaped in a helicopter. After a day-long chase, they were caught and put on trial for genocide and wealth theft.

The trial took place on December 25th and lasted only two hours. Ceaușescu refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the trial and thus did not testify. The Ceaușescu’s were sentenced to death by firing squad, effective immediately. The judge ruled that they would be executed separately, but they asked to be killed together, holding hands. The army allowed it.

As the reign of the Ceaușescu’s came to a close, the future of Romania faced uncertainty and a divided view on the fairness and necessity of the trial that took place. Two weeks after these executions, capital punishment was outlawed in Romania. Democratic and free-market institutions began springing up in Romania, but there has been unrest, corruption, and repeated revolutions plaguing the country for the past thirty years, most recently in 2019.

The Collapse of the Soviet Union

Many in the Soviet government disagreed with Gorbachev’s handling of affairs in Eastern Europe. They wanted a leader who would keep the empire together. In June of 1991, Russia held its first national election, choosing Boris Yeltsin to be their first president. Russia officially withdrew from the Soviet Union on December 12, 1991. Mikhail Gorbachev soon found that though he was the leader of the Soviet Union, the union contained no countries. On December 26, 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev resigned his post and the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

The effects were far-reaching. This was the first time in history that a major power simply ceased to exist in a bloodless revolution. The collapse also saw the creation of 15 new countries that had to form their new governments and decide between capitalism and communism on their own. The Warsaw Pact also ended, and the Cold War was over. The distrust between America and Russia has continued beyond the Cold War, and political tensions continue to be heightened as the two countries find themselves supporting different factional movements throughout the world, in Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen.

[1] Victor Sebestyen, *1989: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (Random House, 2009), 63.

[2] Sebestyen, 231.

[3] Sebestyen, 364-365.

[4] Sebestyen, 358.

[5] Sebestyen, 360.