

# 7 The end of the Cold War (1985–91)

## Timeline

- 1985 Mar:** Gorbachev elected general secretary of the CPSU
- Nov:** Geneva Summit
- 1986 Oct:** Reykjavik Summit
- 1987 Dec:** Washington Summit
- 1988 May:** Moscow Summit
- 1989** East European governments collapse/overthrown
- Dec:** Malta Summit
- 1990 Nov:** CFE Treaty
- 1991 Jul:** Moscow Summit
- Aug:** unsuccessful coup against Gorbachev
- Dec:** collapse of the Soviet Union; CIS formed

## Introduction

On Christmas Day 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as president of the USSR and announced the end of the Soviet Union. This was seen by many as the final act in the Cold War, which had existed in various forms since at least 1946. What was strange about the phenomenon was that not only was it achieved with very limited bloodshed (with the exception of Romania), but also that its outcome was one that most political observers – and indeed most of the general public – had not foreseen.

Very few people had predicted the sudden collapse of a main superpower, although some in the Western security services were well informed about the growing weaknesses of the Soviet Union, both financial and political. However, a small number of political commentators – such as Ernest Mandel, in his 1989 book *Beyond Perestroika: the Future of Gorbachev's USSR* – had earlier stated that the transitional nature of Soviet society (half way between capitalism and socialism) meant it could not remain in that state forever. Instead, it would either have to return to private enterprise or forge a stronger drive to socialism and then move on to communism. In fact, such an idea had been expressed by Trotsky in the 1930s, using the analogy of a person crossing a bridge. He might pause when halfway across, but could not remain there indefinitely: at some point, he would either have to continue to the other side, or return to where he started.

### SOURCE A

It would be truer, therefore, to name the present Soviet regime [1937] in all its contradictoriness, not as a socialist regime, but a preparatory regime transitional from capitalism to socialism. ... To define the Soviet regime as transitional, or intermediate, means to abandon such finished categories as capitalism (and therewith 'state capitalism') and also socialism. But besides being totally inadequate, in itself, such a definition is capable of producing the mistaken idea that from the present Soviet regime only a transition to socialism is possible. In reality a backslide to capitalism is wholly possible. ... The [Soviet] bureaucracy continues to fulfil a necessary function. But it fulfils it in such a way as to prepare an explosion of the whole system which may completely sweep out the results of the [1917] revolution.

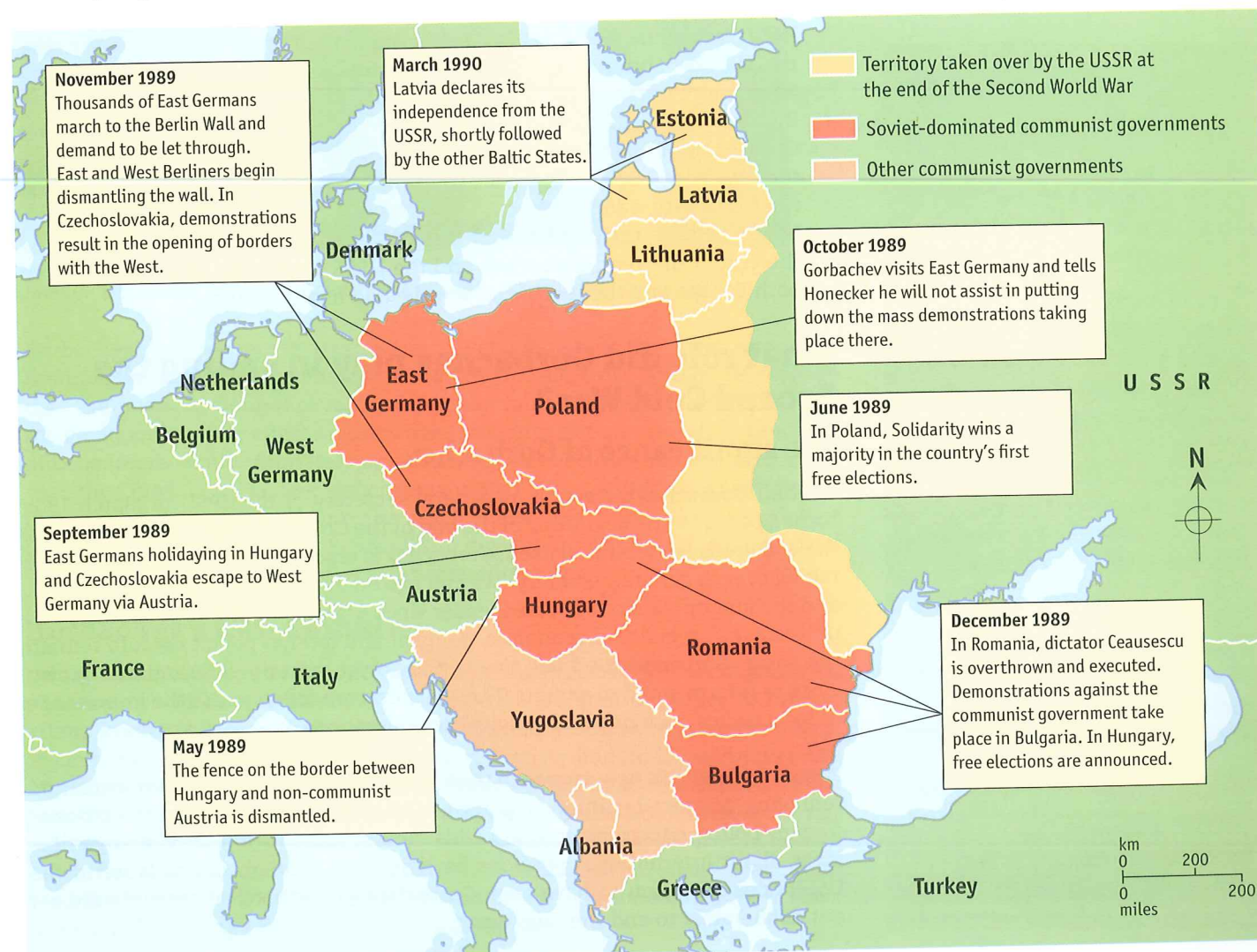
Trotsky, L. 1972. *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?* New York, USA. New Park. pp. 47, 254 and 285–86.

In fact, in 1970, Brzezinski – later to be US national security adviser to Jimmy Carter – had suggested five possible futures for the USSR: **petrification**, **evolution**, **adaptation**, **fundamentalism** or **disintegration**.

Like most commentators in both West and East, including Gorbachev himself, Brzezinski did not believe disintegration was at all likely. Instead, he believed that the most probable outcome was an amalgamation of petrification and adaptation. Yet between 1989 and 1991, the Soviet satellites gained non-communist governments, the Warsaw Pact was dismantled, Germany was reunited and the USSR broke up into its constituent parts.

The more immediate causes leading up to this truly historic event can be traced back to 1989, when the people in the Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe overthrew their governments in various kinds of 'people or popular power' movements, and left the Warsaw Pact, set up by the Soviet Union for its security 34 years before. An iconic moment was the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. However, apart from various long-term factors, the dramatic changes in Soviet-US relations, which had been taking place since 1985, also played a significant part in the eventual collapse of the USSR.

The collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe



**petrification** To stay the same.

**evolution** To change, but in line with the current situation.

**adaptation** To change to become closer to the Western model.

**fundamentalism** To revert to early Cold War hostilities.

**disintegration** To collapse and break up.

## Key questions

- What role did Gorbachev play in ending the Second Cold War?
- How significant was the US response and Reagan's role?
- How important were Soviet economic problems?
- How important was the collapse of Eastern European regimes in ending the Cold War?
- How did Gorbachev help end Cold War tensions in Asia, the Americas and Africa?
- Was the end of the Cold War also the end of the 'Great Contest'?

## Overview

- In November 1985, Gorbachev and Reagan's first summit took place in Geneva; the second was at Reykjavik, in October 1986.
- Progress was made on arms reductions, although this was partly undermined by US deployment of the new B52 bomber.
- In December 1987, the Washington Summit ended with the signing of the INF Treaty, while 1988 saw the Geneva Agreement on ending the Afghan War, the Moscow Summit, and Gorbachev's unilateral decision to greatly reduce Soviet forces.
- By the end of 1989, most Eastern European regimes had fallen, after Gorbachev announced he would not stop reforms. The US agreed to end most restrictions on US–Soviet trade. In 1990, Germany was reunited, and the CFE Treaty was signed.
- In March 1991, the Warsaw Pact was dissolved; later, START was signed. By the end of the year, Gorbachev and the USSR were gone. The Cold War – in both Europe and the rest of the world – had finally ended.

### Mikhail Gorbachev (b. 1931)

In 1978, Gorbachev became a member of the Central Committee of the CPSU; by 1980, he was a member of the Politburo and supported Andropov, who became general secretary in 1983. In 1985, after the deaths of Andropov and then Chernenko, Gorbachev himself became general secretary, and began a programme of reform to revive and modernise the Soviet economy, and to liberalise the political system. He also played the leading role in ending the Cold War, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990. However, his plans to reform the Soviet Union met much opposition and, in December 1991, the USSR collapsed.

## What role did Gorbachev play in ending the Second Cold War?

### The significance of Gorbachev

**Mikhail Gorbachev's** election as general secretary of the CPSU in March 1985 turned out to be the beginning of the end of the Cold War – and, as it turned out, the end of the Soviet Union itself. Gorbachev is reported to have said, just before taking over as general secretary, 'We can't go on living like this'. As the youngest and the first university-educated leader since Stalin to hold this position, it was unlikely that social and economic, political and foreign policies would remain the same. Gorbachev had few ties to the Soviet military elite and had grown close to reform-minded experts. These experts tended to stress the importance of local issues over global ideological considerations.

Part of Gorbachev's new approach thus involved rethinking Soviet priorities and removing 'Marxist–Leninist' ideology as the main factor in determining Soviet foreign policy. According to one of his closest aides, Gorbachev changed his ideas about international relations early in 1986. Though the collapse of the USSR does not seem to have been Gorbachev's intention, he certainly did set out deliberately to end the Cold War.



Mikhail Gorbachev waves to a crowd in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, in 1987

Gorbachev's main concern was to end the stagnation of the Soviet economy, then to revitalise it, and to ensure the security of the Soviet system. He realised that the financial burden of maintaining the military power of the USSR was too great, and that its effect on the Soviet economy and on the living standards of consumers would ultimately undermine Soviet security. He also calculated that the USA's huge budget deficit meant that it too could not maintain its increased defence expenditure for much longer. He thus calculated that it might be possible to prevent Reagan from developing his SDI project (see page 164) by initiating a new round of arms-reduction talks.

### Gorbachev's New Thinking

While Gorbachev's domestic policy was shaped by his three policies of **glasnost**, **perestroika** and **demokratizatsiya**, he also applied another policy to foreign affairs, known as 'Novoe Myshlenie', or New Thinking. Gorbachev's New Thinking argued that confrontation was counterproductive, and that continuing the arms race was pointless, as one side's advance was simply matched – or even bettered – by the other. He also believed that only political accommodation, not military power, would enable problems to be solved and real security achieved. As part of this approach, he decided to state publicly what had, in fact, long been the reality of Soviet foreign policy: that the ideology and language of class war should not shape the Soviet Union's diplomacy.

**glasnost** This was the policy of 'openness' adopted by Gorbachev. He wanted past mistakes and current problems in the USSR to be voiced in public, including criticism of the leadership of the Communist Party and its policies in the media.

**perestroika** This was the policy of 'restructuring' launched by Gorbachev. Though it soon came to be used to describe his general intention to modernise the USSR, it was initially aimed at the Soviet economy. His main aim was to make the economic system more modern and to improve productivity.

**demokratizatsiya** This refers to Gorbachev's attempts to make the Soviet political system more democratic. Under him, elections were reformed to give greater choice to the voters, and political organisations and clubs were allowed to operate outside the control of the Communist Party. Gorbachev also tried to make the government and the Soviet system more independent of party control.

**Question**

What were the main aspects of Gorbachev's 'New Thinking' as regards Soviet foreign policy?

While New Thinking contained elements of traditional Soviet foreign policy, such as aiming for peaceful coexistence and détente with the West, Gorbachev's new policy was also markedly different. In particular, he dropped the dual-track policy of peaceful coexistence as a way of ensuring Soviet security and the peaceful long-term victory of socialism across the world. Gorbachev's stated aim now was simply Soviet security – Khrushchev's idea of a peaceful but competitive coexistence was clearly abandoned.

Gorbachev's new approach was signalled by his appointment of Eduard Shevardnadze as foreign minister. At his first Central Committee meeting in April 1985, Gorbachev announced his wish to reopen arms-control talks and the need to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan. He also spoke of what he called 'reasonable sufficiency' – an early indication of his belief that the arms race need not continue, as all that was needed was the military capacity to threaten an effective counterattack. In particular, unlike the previous Soviet leadership, he was prepared to consider seriously Reagan's 'Zero Option' proposal, which suggested the removal of all intermediate-range missiles from Europe. This was a clear rejection of the policy of parity followed by Brezhnev.

However, while Gorbachev's ideas and approach made him extremely popular abroad, they caused growing criticism from more conservative quarters within the Soviet Union itself.

### How significant was the US response and Reagan's role?

Despite following a somewhat contradictory foreign policy in Central America (see page 170), Reagan also contributed to an improved relationship between the two superpowers. The result was a growing and genuine political accommodation between Reagan and Gorbachev in the second half of the 1980s.

**SOURCE B**

As former Pentagon officials like Casper Weinberger and Richard Perle ... and other proponents of the 'Reagan victory school' have argued, a combination of military and ideological pressures gave the Soviets little choice but to abandon expansionism abroad and repression at home. In their view, the Reagan military build-up foreclosed Soviet military options while pushing the Soviet economy to the breaking point. Reagan partisans stress that his dramatic Star Wars initiative put the Soviets on notice that the next phase of the arms race would be waged in areas where the West held a decisive technological edge.

Deudney D. and Ikenberry, G. J. 'Who won the Cold War?', in *Foreign Policy*, No. 87. Summer 1992. p. 124.

The 'Reagan victory school' viewpoint is based on a stern critique of Carter's détente approach to relations with the Soviet Union, even though it was Carter who initiated the first stages of the Second Cold War after 1979.

**Fact**

These conservative elements in the Soviet Union were determined to maintain the monopoly of power held by the political élite in the USSR, and believed that increased democracy would undermine Soviet control of Eastern Europe. In the main, these hardliners wished to continue with the Stalinist system of rule.

**SOURCE C**

The Jimmy Carter–Cyrus Vance approach of rewarding the Soviet build-up with one-sided arms control treaties, opening Moscow's access to Western capital markets and technologies, and condoning Soviet imperial expansion was perfectly designed to preserve the Brezhnev-style approach, delivering the Soviets from any need to re-evaluate (as they did under Gorbachev) or change their policies. Had the Carter–Vance approach been continued. ... the Cold War and the life of the Soviet Union would almost certainly have been prolonged.

Glynn, P. *Letter to the Editor*, *Foreign Policy*, No. 90. Spring 1993. pp. 171–73.

An arguably more balanced approach is taken by historians such as Rozanne Ridgeway, or M. MacGwire, who stress that Reagan's main contribution to the process was his willingness to move from his strong anti-communist and anti-Soviet position (the 'evil empire') and, instead, to be prepared to engage and negotiate with the new Soviet leader.

This helped a new atmosphere of rapprochement to develop during the four summits that took place between the two leaders. Nonetheless, the US – aware of the increasingly problematic nature of the Soviet Union's economy – drove hard bargains. Soviet weaknesses in Eastern Europe were also exploited, by offering concessions to those satellites that tried to establish greater independence from Moscow, and punishing those regimes (such as Poland under Wojciech Jarulzelski) that stayed loyal.

It became clear that, in the Second Cold War, US strategy had moved from containment and then détente to a policy 'beyond containment', which showed a refusal to simply coexist. Instead, from a position of greater economic, technological and military strength, the US began to demand fundamental change in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

### First steps, 1985

As noted above, both Gorbachev's desire to shape a new foreign policy and so bring to an end the Second Cold War, and the fact that Reagan's approach began to moderate at the same time, enabled the processes of negotiation to progress. In particular, it was agreed to resume the arms-control negotiations, which had ended after the Soviet Union walked out in November 1983 (see page 164).

However, Gorbachev was quick to take steps to push the pace. In April 1985, he froze further deployments of the SS-20s; in August he declared a temporary halt to Soviet underground nuclear testing; in September he proposed that the USSR and the US reduce all strategic nuclear weapons stocks by 50%; and in October, he announced plans for a reduction in the number of Soviet missiles in Eastern Europe. Over the next three years, four US–Soviet summits took place on arms control.

**The US – aware of the increasingly problematic nature of the Soviet Union's economy – drove hard bargains. Soviet weaknesses in Eastern Europe were also exploited.**

**Overall relations between the two superpowers deteriorated in the first half of 1986. There was increased US aggression in Libya and Afghanistan, and in May Reagan announced that the US would not adhere to SALT II.**

## The Four Summits, 1985–88

### Geneva

The first meeting took place in Geneva, in November 1985. Although there were no significant agreements, it was the first such summit for six years. However, any practical agreement on the reduction of Soviet ICBMs was prevented by continuing fear of Reagan's 'Star Wars' plans. Also, Reagan rejected Gorbachev's suggestion that they issue a joint statement promising that neither side would be the first to launch a nuclear attack. This was because the US wanted to keep the option of responding to a conventional attack with nuclear weapons. However, they did agree to promise to prevent any war between themselves and not to seek military superiority.

Nonetheless, after the summit Gorbachev continued to push the pace. In January 1986, he took the US by surprise when he proposed the total elimination of all nuclear weapons by the end of the century. Other offers followed – to eliminate all ICBMs in ten years and to withdraw all tactical nuclear weapons from Europe. Then, in April 1986, he suggested new talks on the reduction of Warsaw Pact and NATO conventional forces. In May, Gorbachev officially launched his New Thinking, despite Reagan's continued refusal to drop the development of SDI.

In spite of this, overall relations between the two superpowers deteriorated in the first half of 1986. There was increased US aggression in Libya and Afghanistan, and in May Reagan announced that the US would not adhere to the still unratified SALT II agreement.

### Reykjavik

The second Reagan–Gorbachev summit, which took place in Reykjavik in October 1986, was predictably not as good-natured as Geneva had been. Once again, the USA's Strategic Defence Initiative was the main item of contention.

At first Gorbachev tried to move the talks from consideration of reductions and limitations to complete nuclear disarmament, and Reagan called for the complete elimination of all ballistic nuclear missiles within ten years. Soviet leaders realised that their ailing economy would not withstand the strain of attempting to keep up with the technological advances of the US.

Agreement was reached in principle that strategic nuclear weapons should be cut by 50%, and that medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe should be withdrawn. However, arguments about SDI finally caused the summit to break up as Reagan refused to abandon SDI, while Gorbachev said further reductions could not happen without this step. As a consequence, no actual agreements were made, and so it seemed a deadlock had been reached. Nonetheless, Gorbachev described the summit as an 'intellectual breakthrough' in relations between the USSR and the USA.

This deadlock was broken by Gorbachev in February 1987, when he offered to accept the NATO policy of the zero-zero option on the deployment of SS-20s and Pershing and Cruise missiles in Europe. In essence, this meant that both sides would withdraw their missiles. Gorbachev's acceptance of NATO's terms

#### Fact

Ever since it had been announced by Reagan in March 1983, the Soviet Union had seen the SDI as violating the ABM Treaty of 1972, and thus escalating the nuclear arms race by rendering impossible any Soviet response to a US first strike.



President Reagan announces the initiation of the Strategic Defence Initiative in March 1983

was a complete reversal of what had been Soviet policy on this issue for ten years. It was a huge concession by the Soviet Union, and Gorbachev's critics in the USSR saw this as a dangerous surrender.

In November, Gorbachev acknowledged that human rights needed to be improved in the Soviet bloc and that the 'Iron Curtain' should be lifted. He also spoke of the need to avoid superpower confrontation in the Developing World.

### Washington

As a result of Gorbachev's offer, a third summit meeting took place, in Washington in December 1987. This resulted in the signing of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which agreed that all land-based intermediate- and shorter-range nuclear missiles would be withdrawn from Europe. This was the first arms agreement to be signed since 1979; it was also unique – never before had arms-reduction talks led to the elimination of an entire category of nuclear weapons.

The INF Treaty was also historically important as, for the first time in arms control agreements, the two sides accepted verification procedures, which included access to data and the witnessing of weapons destruction. Thus the arms race was not just slowed down by the INF Treaty, but was actually reversed. At this stage, there were signs that the Cold War would end via a mutually agreed settlement.

#### Fact

In practical terms, the INF Treaty covered only about five per cent of the total stockpile of nuclear warheads in existence (about 2,500 out of 50,000).