



Mikhail Gorbachev: “Man of the Decade” or Destroyer of the Union?

Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and immediately tried to improve both social and economic conditions. He called what he was doing - a revolution. His had been a bloodless revolution, without the murderous associations that revolution has carried in the past. He was trying to transform a government that was not just bad or useless but destructive.

His first program began a new era of **glasnost**, or openness in public discussions of Soviet problems. This granted increased freedom of speech and the press to the Soviet citizens. His second program, **perestroika** (restructuring), was a program to restructure Soviet economic policy and make it more efficient. He wanted to start a market economy, where consumers influenced what was produced. Citizens gained the right to set up their own businesses and heads of large factories were told to make their plants profitable. Gorbachev realized that political reform had to come before economic reform. He established a new Soviet parliament, the Congress of People’s Deputies. It met for the first time in 1989 and in 1990, Gorbachev allowed non-communist political parties to organize.

Because of these reforms, relations with the West improved. In 1987 and 1991, the United States and the Soviet Union signed major nuclear arms reduction treaties. Gorbachev ordered Soviet forces out of Afghanistan in 1989.

Some communists opposed Gorbachev, believing that his reforms were ruining the Soviet Union and violating the teachings of Marx. Others regarded Gorbachev as a hero because they believe he is presiding over the end of a hateful



What was Gorbachev’s main accomplishment?

What does the term glasnost mean?

What is perestroika?

ideology. However, if you asked Gorbachev, he would have told you that he does not mean to abolish communism. He wanted to save it by transforming it. He hopes not just to correct the "deformations of socialism," as he called the legacies of Stalinism and the uselessness of centralized economic planning. Gorbachev's goal was more comprehensive: to repair distortions of the Russian political character that go back centuries.

In 1991, the communists who opposed Gorbachev led an unsuccessful coup against him. To lessen the power of the Communists, Gorbachev resigned from the party. The Soviet Parliament suspended all party activities. The Communist Party no longer controlled the government, the economy, or the military. Gorbachev continued his reforms. In spite of his efforts, Russia, Ukraine, and 13 other republics that had once formed the Soviet Union declared their independence. At the end of 1991, Gorbachev resigned as president. Most of the former Soviet republics formed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The Soviet Union no longer existed. Russia was the dominant state in the CIS. This succession of events ended the cold war.

And so, you may still ask 'who is Gorbachev?' Is he really a hero? There is no doubt that he was a powerful and largely symbolic presence of the world since he first came to power. He has shown the world change by altering the relationship of the Soviet empire with the rest of the world and changing the nature of the empire itself. He had also made possible the end of the cold war. Or, is he a destroyer of the union? Because of Gorbachev and his leadership, one of the world's greatest superpowers came crumbling down.



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What was Gorbachev trying to do to communism?

Why were Communists opposed to Gorbachev and his policies?

What happened as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union?