

# ENDING THE COLD WAR: THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION

*The collapse of the Soviet Union began in the late 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev sought major economic and political reforms that encouraged revolution among the satellite nations of the U.S.S.R. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, followed by Germany's reunification, the Soviet Union broke up into 15 independent states on December 25, 1991. This signaled the end of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States.*

## Mikhail Gorbachev's Reforms



Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the Soviet Union in 1985. A dedicated reformer, Gorbachev introduced the policies of glasnost and perestroika to the USSR. Gorbachev hoped these changes would be enough to spark the sluggish Soviet economy. *Glasnost*, or openness, allowed western ideas and goods into the USSR, including freedoms of speech and government transparency. Government officials would be held accountable to the people for their actions, citizens were allowed to protest, and the media reported on state issues for the first time. Many of the USSR's satellite states used this new found freedom to express their desire for independence.

Perestroika, or restructuring, was an initiative that allowed limited market incentives to Soviet citizens. Gorbachev meant to restructure the Soviet economy so it would work more efficiently. He allowed some private ownership and released some of the tight control the government had on the economy. However, the people and economy of the Soviet Union were used to the government making all production decisions, and the economy got worse before it got better.

## Nationalist Movements Spread

Opposition to Soviet policies was growing in other associated states of Eastern Europe. The majority of people were against Soviet interference and the presence of the Red Army in the Eastern Bloc. In Poland, protests over food shortages and the price of consumer products led to the establishment of Solidarity (*Solidarność*). Led by Lech Walesa, Solidarity encouraged continued protest against the government and was suppressed by the army. By early 1982 Solidarity was banned and its leaders arrested. Pope John Paul II, who was born in Poland, and the Catholic Church worked to undermine communist leadership and helped to secure the release of Solidarity members. As the Polish economy continued to decline, protests spread throughout the country and many workers illegally went on strike. By early 1989, Solidarity leadership and the Polish government agreed to hold new elections, after which Solidarity was able to form an anti-communist government.



In Hungary, following a change in leadership, the government decided to re-introduce multi-party democracy and hold elections. The border with Austria was opened and free movement was allowed. As thousands of people were fleeing East Germany for the West through Hungary, the Berlin Wall became ineffective. As a result, the East German government was forced to consider opening the border. On November 9, 1989, East Berlin announced a change in the city's relations with the West. Starting at midnight, citizens were free to cross the country's borders. East and West Berliners flocked to the wall, flooding through the checkpoints at midnight. People used hammers and picks

to knock away chunks of the wall while cranes and bulldozers pulled down section after section. Soon the Berlin Wall, which had become a symbol of Soviet oppression, was gone and Berlin was united for the first time since

1945. The reunification of East and West Germany was made official on October 3, 1990, almost one year after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

### The Soviet Union Breaks Up

With the new found freedom of Gorbachev's reforms, some outlying Soviet states began to rebel. The first states to demand their freedom were the Baltic states of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia. Soon more states wanted their independence including Armenia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. The central government of the Soviet Union began to feel the pressure of so many states wanting independence. With the communist government on the verge of collapse, Soviet hardliners staged a coup by kidnapping Gorbachev and taking over the government. Meanwhile, Boris Yeltsin, the leader of the Russian Soviet Republic, demanded the arrest of the hardliners. . When the Soviet citizens began to protest, the hardliners called in the military to shut them down. However, the soldiers refused to shoot and arrest their own people. Without the military to back them up, the coup failed. Though Gorbachev was freed, he was left with little legitimacy.



On December 25, 1991, Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia declared independence and the Soviet Union was dissolved into 15 separate independent countries. Earlier in the day, Mikhail Gorbachev resigned his post as president of the Soviet Union, leaving Boris Yeltsin as president of the newly independent Russian state. People all over the world watched in amazement at this relatively peaceful transition from former Communist monolith into multiple separate nations.



The Cold War had begun because each side had the very different systems of communism and capitalism. However, as time went on, it became clear that no one could really win the Cold War. The United States spent trillions of dollars arming themselves for a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union that fortunately never came. Regardless, thousands of lives were lost waging proxy wars in Korea and Vietnam. In contrast, the Soviet Union was the largest country in the world, with a population of more than 290 million, and 100 distinct nationalities lived within its borders. It also boasted an arsenal of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, and its sphere of influence, exerted through such mechanisms as the Warsaw Pact, extended throughout Eastern Europe. However, economic stagnation had hobbled the country for years, and perestroika reforms only served to exacerbate the problem. The collapse of the Soviet Union was hailed by the west as a victory for freedom, a triumph of democracy over totalitarianism, and evidence of the superiority of capitalism over socialism. Indeed, the breakup of the Soviet Union transformed the entire world's political situation, leading to a complete reformulation of political, economic and military alliances all over the globe.