

# THE END OF THE SOVIET UNION

How Communism Did Not Withstand Openness & Restructuring

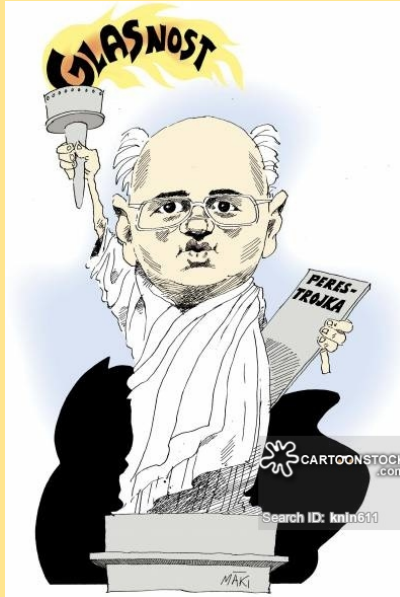
**P**eter Dyck and his brothers lived in the Soviet Union for the entire duration of communism. They were children when it was established in 1917, they suffered under all of Stalin's harsh policies, they were imprisoned for a combined total of 50 years in the Soviet Gulag, and were exiled for years afterwards. They were finally able to leave the country that had so mistreated them when the USSR collapsed in 1991 under Mikhail Gorbachev.

Gorbachev, the 8th and final president of the Soviet Union, came to power in 1985 at the height of the Cold War. The USSR and the US were rushing to put nuclear weapons in space, but the Soviet economy was suffering. The state deficit was enormous, there were long bread lines, and the government had to issue ration cards. Gorbachev was a younger leader, and he brought new ideas of reform into office.

**Perestroika.** Gorbachev introduced perestroika in 1986. This was a restructuring of the government and economy, intending to revitalize Soviet communism and to improve life for Soviet citizens.

**Economic Reform.** Gorbachev hoped to transition the country from a planned to a market economy. The Law on Cooperatives in 1988 allowed private ownership of businesses, for the first time since the New Economic Policy of the 1920s. Under the provision for private ownership, cooperative restaurants, shops, and manufacturers became part of Soviet life.

**Political Reform: Democratization.** Gorbachev wanted to maintain Soviet communism, but permit more freedom and democracy within it. He sought to keep the Soviet Union intact, but have voluntary participation from all 15 republics and democratic representation. In 1989, Gorbachev



held the first free elections in the Soviet Union. He was elected president, but was the sole candidate on the ballot. He removed the Communist Party's control over the media and press and allowed non-Party members to run. In 1990, the Party lost its status as the sole political party.

**Glasnost.** Combined with the restructuring, Gorbachev's policy of glasnost, or openness, gave the Soviet people more freedom of speech and the press than they had ever had under communism. Gorbachev hoped that transparency and debate would cause people to support his

reform initiatives. Legislative proceedings were televised, allowing people to form opinions on their government and the proposed reforms.

In 1986, Gorbachev released and pardoned all remaining political prisoners (just 288 by then). Eighteen million people had passed through the Gulag, many more had been affected by famine or the Purges, and the crimes of seven decades of communist rule began to be known. The nation began taking toll of the excesses of communist leaders, and were not punished for doing so. The government even admitted in 1990 that the NKVD had committed the Katyn Massacres, in which 22,000 Polish officers were killed during World War II.

**Foreign Policies.** The West applauded Gorbachev for his new policies. Presidents Gorbachev and Reagan worked together to end the Cold War, disarming nuclear



**Reagan and Gorbachev, the leaders of the two superpowers, ended the Cold War in 1989.**

Gorbachev's policy of Glasnost, or openness, allowed increased democracy, but also caused the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

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The Berlin Wall, which had separated East and West Berlin, opened on November 9, 1989. For the first time in 28 years, Germans were allowed to cross between the communist East and the democratic West. It was a step toward the reunification of Germany.

weapons and improving East and West relations. In 1988, Gorbachev ended the **Brezhnev Doctrine** that allowed the Soviet Union to use military force to maintain communism in its satellite countries. From this point on, the Eastern Bloc nations could determine their own affairs. On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall ceased to divide east and west, and Germany was reunified shortly after. Gorbachev decided not to interfere, stating that German reunification was a German matter.

**Nationalism.** After 70 years of repression, the Soviet people did not want a revitalized communism. When they were finally free to speak and to vote, they spoke of nationalism and self-governance, not of reforming the corrupt and repressive system.

One by one, most Eastern Bloc countries declared their independence between 1988 and 1991. In keeping with his word, Gorbachev did not use military force to retain them. Laws were quickly passed in many non-Russian republics, giving precedence for national languages over Russian. In Russia, Boris Yeltsin gained popularity and prominence in 1990, and was elected President of the Russian Republic in 1991.



**Gorbachev failed to preserve communism and the Soviet Union, but his failure was more meaningful than success would have been.** He ended 70 years of repressive communist rule and the Cold War, introduced democracy to Russia, and allowed Eastern Nations the right of self-government. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990 and many other international honors.

## The Dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Gorbachev's reforms came too late in the history of the Soviet Union, and the nationalist movement was too strong to halt it. In 1990, Ukraine voted for independence, and both Ukraine and Russia declared their laws sovereign over Soviet Laws. This left Gorbachev, as President of the Soviet Union, leader of no union at all.

**Gorbachev's Resignation.** On December 25, 1991, Gorbachev resigned publicly. He declared his office as President of the Soviet Union extinct, since the union no longer existed. The next day, the Supreme Soviet declared that the Soviet Union had ceased to exist as a functioning state, and voted both itself and the Union out of existence. Boris Yeltsin, the Russian President, moved into Gorbachev's old office.

After his resignation, Gorbachev remained active in Russian politics and world affairs. He established two political parties. He received many international medals, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990, and the Courage of Conscience Award for his leadership in disarmament, and the end of the Cold War.