

History: The Cold War
Lesson 30 of 30

Worksheet:

Why did the Cold War come to an end?



How did the Cold War come to an end?

Causes

In January 1981, **Ronald Reagan** became President of the USA. He was openly the USA's most **anti-Communist president**. He won a huge victory in the election, largely because of his **harsh stance on Communism** and **vocal desires to 'roll back' the 'evil empire'**. Reagan **increased spending on arms by 13%** in 1982 alone and his presidency led to a period often known as 'The Second Cold War'.

In 1985, **Mikhail Gorbachev** came to power in the USSR. Over the previous decades, huge amounts of money had been spent on developing arms to try and keep up with the USA but the USSR had never managed this. Equally, the war in Afghanistan had gone on for a lot longer than the Soviets were expecting and their **economy was overstretched**. This meant that, within the USSR itself and its satellites, **the standards of living were dropping** and the **Soviet economy was incredibly overstretched and weak**. Consequently, when the young **Gorbachev** came to power in 1985, he brought fresh hope to the USSR. He wanted to **improve superpower relations** and **improve the lives of people living under Soviet control**.



Gorbachev launched an **extensive programme of reform** based on three main principles. The first was a **sweeping reform of the Communist Party and Soviet system** within the USSR based upon the two ideas of **'perestroika'** and **'glasnost'** or reconstruction and openness. **Gorbachev** wanted to make the **Soviet economy more efficient**, by introducing some capitalist principles like elements of a free market and wanted to give the **Soviet people more of a say in how their country was run**, including the **opportunity to challenge their government**. Alongside these reforms, **Gorbachev** also **ended the Brezhnev Doctrine**, which gave Eastern European states **more independence** and also **ended the arms race with the USA**, largely because the Soviets could no longer afford it. All of these changes initially made **Gorbachev** a **very popular leader**, both among the people of the USSR and Eastern Europe, but **also with the USA**. **Gorbachev** got on well with **Reagan** and the USA began to concede that, with **Gorbachev** as its leader, **perhaps the USSR was not so 'evil' after all**.



These new improved relations between the USA and the USSR led to **a series of summit meetings from 1985-1988**. While not all meetings ended in formal agreement, **some very important decisions were made**, most notably that both countries would begin to **limit their arms** and particularly their nuclear weapons. This agreement was enshrined in **The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty** which was signed by **Reagan** and **Gorbachev** in 1987 at the **Washington Summit**. It was clear that **Cold War tensions were thawing** and that the ruthless competition that had dwarfed superpower relations for decades were finally coming to an end. This was confirmed two years later, at the **Malta Summit**, when **Gorbachev** and the new US president, **George Bush**, met and **committed to long-lasting peace**. Finally, it seemed that superpower relations had reached a **point of stability** where achieving an end to the Cold War might be possible.



Meanwhile, **Gorbachev's** 'new thinking' was also **changing the situation in Eastern Europe**. In **1988**, **Gorbachev** announced to the UN that the **USSR was withdrawing Soviet troops from Warsaw Pact countries** and that the **Soviet army would no longer intervene to prop up unpopular regimes**. In a separate address to the leaders of Warsaw Pact countries, he urged these leaders to **'listen to your people' and reform**, just as he had done in the USSR. Some Eastern European leaders listened, and in places like **Hungary**, **moves were made for the country to become a multi-party state**. In other Eastern European countries, like East Germany, leaders were slow to respond prompting people to take to the streets to protest for change. It was clear that the **tide was changing** and that **dramatic change was on the horizon**.



Events

Over the course of the next year, the beginning of the end of the Cold War began. Important changes started to be achieved in Eastern Europe. In **May 1989, the border between Hungary and non-Communist Austria was opened** and tens of thousands of people, particularly East Germans, began to **use this gap in the 'Iron Curtain' as their passage to the West**. By 1989, it became clear that the **Berlin Wall no longer served a purpose** and, on 9th November, the restrictions which it had placed on East Germans for the past 28 years gradually began to be dismantled.

As travel restrictions eased, and Europe became reunited, **many Eastern Europeans countries began to hold their first democratic elections in 40 years** and one by one each country elected its **first non-Communist leaders**. By mid-1990, it was clear that the reforms that **Gorbachev** had introduced to reform and strengthen Communism had actually served to undermine it. By the end of the year, **all Communist regimes in eastern Europe had been overthrown**. With its purpose completely removed, it became **impossible for the Warsaw Pact to survive**. After all, the Warsaw Pact was an alliance that united the Communist states of Eastern Europe against Capitalist states. If there were no Communist states in Eastern Europe, it had no future and **it formally ended in 1991. Soviet control over Eastern Europe had ended**.



At first, the **Soviet republics** watched these events in awe but they soon **responded with action**. Inspired by the freedoms that Eastern European countries had achieved, the **republics started to break free from the USSR's ever loosening grasp. In 1990, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania all declared their independence** and they were followed closely by other republics over the following months. **Gorbachev's** attempts to keep hold of the republics by introducing a new constitution fell on deaf ears and by **mid 1991 it was clear that the USSR was unravelling**. Although he survived an attempt by hard-line Communists to remove him from power, **Gorbachev** finally admitted defeat. **On 25th December 1991, he resigned** and the **USSR was formally dissolved**. With the fall of the USSR came the **final end of the Cold War**. What once had stood as a **strong rival to the ways of life promoted by the Capitalist West** now **no longer existed** and the rivalries that had defined nearly half a century were finally ended.



Consequences

In the West, and particularly the USA, the **fall of the USSR was celebrated as a victory**. Many Americans felt that they had **triumphed over the Soviet empire** that **Ronald Reagan** had so publicly labelled as 'evil' just eight years previously. As countries throughout Eastern Europe and the **former Soviet bloc began to embrace Capitalism**, many Americans looked on confidently, believing that **triumph in the Cold War had shown that 'West was best'**.

In many respects, this **post-Cold war confidence was actually very misplaced**. While many countries did enter the 1990s embracing capitalism and celebrating their new independence, the **end of the Cold War also created extensive instability** particularly in areas like the Balkan states that had formerly been part of the Communist state of Yugoslavia. Religious and ethnic divisions became very pronounced and brutal conflicts divided this area for much of the early 1990s. **The Cold War had also left its mark on countries in the Middle East.**

After the Soviets left Afghanistan at the end of the 1980s, a brutal civil war broke out between rival groups who wanted to control the country. Therefore, in many ways, the Cold War's **greatest legacy** can be seen in the **divisions that US-Soviet rivalry had created within countries that remained long after these superpowers had left.**



Why did the Cold War come to an end?

The **Cold War ended in 1991** because **Communist control collapsed in Eastern Europe and then the USSR**. With this collapse came the **end of the rivalry that had existed between East and West for the previous five decades** and which had laid at the heart of the Cold War; put simply, **once Communism had been defeated, there was no-one left to fight**. However, while the process by which the Cold War came to an end is clear, the **causes of the collapse of Communism are more open to debate**.

Role of Gorbachev

Some historians argue that **Gorbachev** caused Communism to collapse, however unintentionally. They point out that **his 'new thinking' and reforms set in motion a chain of unstoppable events** that saw Soviet control over Eastern Europe weaken and eventually disintegrate.



Role of Reagan

Other historians say that the **USA drove these changes**. They cite **Reagan** as the **key player in causing the end of the Cold War**, particularly because **his harsh anti-Communism** encouraged people in Eastern Europe to rise up against their repressive governments. **Reagan** also **increased spending on arms by a third** and directly appealed to **Gorbachev** to make changes, like those outlined in his 1983 'Tear Down this Wall' speech. Many historians use events like these to argue that **Reagan forced the USSR into a corner** – they had to negotiate and make changes or risk facing financial ruin or direct attack by the stronger USA.

Role of individuals in Eastern Europe

Finally, many argue that the **role played by people in Eastern Europe and the Soviet republics** in bringing about the end of Communism **should not be forgotten**. From the people who first dismantled the barbed wire fence that separated Hungary from Austria in 1989, to the brave rebels who gave their lives on the streets of Timisoara in December 1989, Eastern Europeans played **a fundamental role in shaping their own destinies** and in ending Communist rule over their lives. **By 1990, all Communist governments in Eastern Europe had been replaced. People power had brought about the end of Communist rule** and set the world on the path to the end of the Cold War.



Multiple factors?

It is perhaps **too simplistic** to see **one of these factors as solely responsible** for the collapse of Soviet power and the subsequent end of the Cold War that this created. In many respects, the factors link. For instance, **Gorbachev's** 'new thinking' **created the environment in which the people of Eastern Europe were able to make changes for themselves**. With his removal of the **Brezhnev Doctrine** and its replacement with the Sinatra Doctrine came **increased independence for Eastern European countries** which, in turn, allowed them the **opportunity to seize power without the fear of reprisal from the USSR**. At the same time, **Gorbachev's** hand was at least in part forced by the fact that the **Soviet economy was so weak** due to the cumulative impact of the long Afghanistan war, the pressures of having to support a sprawling empire and the high costs of keeping up with an unrealistic arms race. Viewed in this context, **Gorbachev's** reforms seem more **desperate than deliberate** and this suggests that **external factors caused Soviet control to collapse**.

Therefore, it is important to remember that a **number of factors played a role in causing the collapse of communist control in Eastern Europe**. However, what is undeniable is that this **collapse in Soviet power** set off a **chain of events** that rapidly transformed Europe and that **culminated, in December 1991, in the final end of the Cold War**.



Glossary

Brezhnev Doctrine – Soviet foreign policy which called for military intervention by Warsaw Pact forces if another member of the Warsaw Pact tried to leave the Soviet sphere of influence or reform Communism in their country too much.

Glasnost – Russian word meaning ‘openness’ which refers to Gorbachev’s policy in the USSR that encouraged free speech, and end to censorship and allowed people to question the government

Perestroika – Russian word for ‘reconstruction’ which refers to Gorbachev’s policy of re-organising and restructuring the Soviet state, particularly by allowing some elements of a free, Capitalist economy to function within the USSR to improve the economy’s efficiency.



Interpretations

The causes of the collapse of Soviet control divides historians, as is illustrated by the following two interpretations.

Historian A

The USA caused Communist control in Eastern Europe to collapse because it forced the USSR into a corner. When Reagan increased spending on arms by a third, he knew that the USSR would not be able to keep up and would be forced to negotiate and to introduce reforms. Therefore, it was Reagan who drove the end of the Cold War. Gorbachev was just a passenger.

Historian B

Had Gorbachev not become Party General Secretary in 1985, things would have looked very different in Eastern Europe and the USSR. Although Gorbachev intended to strengthen communism in Eastern Europe, his reforms, like ending the Brezhnev Doctrine, only made Communist control weaker and eventually caused it to collapse. His 'new thinking' gave the people of Eastern Europe and the Soviet republics a chance of freedom, and they seized it with both hands.



Interpretations Questions

1. What does Historian B say was the cause of the collapse of Communist control in Eastern Europe?
2. What 'reforms' did Gorbachev introduce to Eastern Europe from 1985-1989?
3. How did these reforms 'only make Communist control weaker'?
4. In what ways did the people of Eastern Europe 'seize' a 'chance of freedom...with both hands'?
5. Challenge question: Do you agree more with Historian A or B? Explain your answer.

