

**GRADE 12****HISTORY****IF 1. THE COLLAPSE OF THE USSR****INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

In the 1970s the Cold War still dominated international politics and world attention. Richard Nixon, president of the USA, was a staunch anti-communist who had to remove the USA from its involvement in Vietnam. Due to internal pressures and the mounting cost of the war the last US troops left SE Asia in 1972. The USA had failed to achieve its objectives in this Cold War conflict. Nixon and the new Soviet Premier, Leonid Brezhnev, were bitter rivals but they both realized that a nuclear war would destroy both nations and so they entered a period known as detente. During this period of détente, the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) was negotiated whereby both countries agreed to limit their nuclear weapons and the USA also sold 750million dollars worth of grain to the USSR. This demonstrated co-operative relations and thus, a shift away from the Cold War.

**DETENTE:** it is the relaxing or easing of tensions between nations. In this instance, it refers to the easing of tension between the two major Cold war rivals, the USA and the USSR. After the Cuban missile crisis there was a major period of détente.

Whilst huge amounts were still being spent, especially in the arms race, peace between the two nations existed in varying levels through most of the 1970s. Konstantin Chernenko replaced Brezhnev as Soviet premier, who in turn was replaced by Yuri Andropov when he died. When Andropov died suddenly, the Politburo (the most powerful ruling body of the Communist Party) turned to the young Mikhail Gorbachev to fulfil the role of Premier.

Gorbachev was not a hard liner like the other communist leaders and he had new ideas that would change world politics.

**INTERNALLY IN THE USSR:** when Gorbachev became leader of the Soviet Union in 1985, the country was in a crisis. Its resources were being drained by an ongoing war in Afghanistan and by the continued weapons production required by the Cold War arms race. Relations with the west were strained. The Soviet economy was stagnant and on the brink of collapse. Industrial and agricultural production had declined and people were demoralized by the shortages of essential consumer goods, inadequate housing, poor public healthcare, dilapidated infrastructure and widespread alcoholism and substance abuse. The standard of living was extremely low and people were very poor. There was a sense that the government could not find solutions to any of these problems. Those in power had many privileges, but showed little interest in improving the lives of ordinary citizens. Gorbachev decided to address these issues in his internal reform policies which included the introduction of 'glasnost' and 'perestroika'.



**MIKHAIL GORBACHEV**

Gorbachev brought new energy and dynamism to the Soviet leadership. He recognized that there were problems and that major changes were needed, but at no stage did he intend to abandon communism or dismantle the USSR. He believed that the Soviet Communist Party should control the necessary changes, however. These included the restructuring of the economy and the ending of the culture of silence and censorship by the state.

He wanted more interaction and to encourage debate among the average citizens. With this in mind, he introduced three new policies:

**1. GLASNOST**

Until 1985, the Soviet state had controlled all art, literature, theatre, intellectual debate and the media. Only those forms of expression acceptable to Communist Party principles were permitted. Everything else was censored or banned, but under glasnost, freedom of speech was encouraged. Newspapers and magazines could report events openly and criticize the government. Old versions of Soviet history were debated and stories of oppression and terror, particularly under Stalin's rule, started to emerge. In 1989 for the first time in Soviet history, Gorbachev allowed free elections for a new parliament, the Chamber of People's Deputies, in which opposition parties could participate.

**2. PERESTROIKA**

The main focus of economic restructuring was to move from a state controlled economy to one in which market forces played a major role. This was more in line with economic policies of the West. Businesses could now make their own decisions about prices, production and marketing. They had to finance themselves by getting loans from newly-created banks. Bankrupt businesses no longer received support from the state and were closed down. The state stopped subsidizing goods and services, leading to more realistic pricing based on supply and demand. People could buy and sell at a profit, and foreign investment was encouraged. The aim of perestroika was to raise the rate of economic growth and to improve living standards, but it was not successful. Prices increased dramatically, especially for food, housing and medical costs. Production remained low and there were shortages resulting in long queues for basic goods. Inflation and foreign debt increased sharply. Life for the ordinary citizen did not improve under Gorbachev. As a result he lost a lot of support. Gorbachev's reforms changed the Soviet Union forever, but they also set the scene for his own downfall. His moderate economic reforms went far further than he had intended and his belief that the party could keep control of the reform process proved wrong. The openness he had initiated led to overwhelming public criticism and hostility.

### 3. DEMOCRATISIZATION

Gorbachev allowed for people to vote! True, it was only for leadership positions within the one party ruling state, the Communist Party. (So there were no other parties that could be voted into power.) But he hoped to ignite fresh leadership and new faces to revive a stagnant and corrupt system. He also hoped that allowing the people to vote in their leaders would give them more of a sense of participation in political affairs.

Democratisation was most evident in the former Soviet States in Eastern Europe which were granted the freedom to make their own decisions. The idea was to keep them communist under the rule of the Communist Parties in those countries but without the Kremlin's intervention. However, external parties were able to overthrow the ruling parties and democracies were introduced to the former Soviet States. (You need to know how each one gained their independence!)

### RECAP: THE COLLAPSE OF THE USSR

#### The problems at the time were:

- In 1979, USSR troops invaded Afghanistan – drained USSR of resources due to weapon production
- US president Carter – imposed embargoes on the USSR. He also increased US military spending and the US boycotted the Moscow Summer Olympics
- The USSR's economy was on the brink of collapse. So, while the USA could increase their spending on the military, the USSR could not.

#### Impact of Gorbachev's Reforms

- Perestroika was not successful in improving economic growth and living standards
- Prices of food, housing and health increased
- Production was low and some state businesses collapsed
- There were shortages and long queues
- Foreign debt increased
- Glasnost enabled people to be heard, but communist bureaucrats stopped their reforms
- Boris Yeltsin called for further change and accused Gorbachev of not going far enough in his reforms. Yeltsin then gained favour with the Russian people.

#### Reasons for the collapse of the USSR

- The form of Government in the USSR was a dictatorship
- Russian people questioned this type of government
- Across Europe, people reacted and protested against this government.
- It inspired nationalism, which people in the USSR also wanted
- Changes introduced did not solve the problems and people became restless.
- By the end of 1989, civil and political societies challenged the communist government and their autocratic rule
- In 1989, the Berlin Wall was broken down
- This marked the end of communist governments in Eastern Europe and the USSR

- The Cold War ended finally, by the internal collapse of a superpower, the USSR
- The USA was now the most powerful country in the world.
- In 1991, a coup led by a group of pro-soviets tried to overthrow Gorbachev
- The coup failed, but the USSR collapsed
- By the end of 1991, a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) replaced the USSR, the largest of these states was the Russian Federation
- Gorbachev resigned