

THE COLD WAR

Biography

When he became the leader of the Soviet Union in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev knew he had to make changes. The economy was in shambles, a war raged in Afghanistan, and Communist Party bureaucrats held tightly to power. Even Gorbachev could not have known how quickly his reforms would change his nation and the world. In less than a decade, Gorbachev's policies led to the end of the Soviet Union and brought about sweeping transformations in Eastern Europe. ♦ *As you read, think about how individuals can influence history. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Mikhail Gorbachev (1931–)

Before he became the leader of one of the world's most powerful nations, Mikhail Gorbachev knew hard times. He was born in 1931 to a family of peasant farmers in southwestern Russia. For a time, his mother kept him home from school because he had no shoes. Despite his absences, he distinguished himself as a student.

Gorbachev worked as a driver of harvesting equipment on a state-run farm as a young man. From there, he entered law school in Moscow and became a member of the Communist Party. After graduation in 1955, he became a leader of Komsomol, the Young Communist League. He gradually worked his way into positions of more and more influence within the party.

By 1980, Gorbachev was a full member of the Politburo, the Soviet Union's policy-making body. At the age of 49, he was the youngest member of the Communist Party's elite. When Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko died in 1985, the Politburo elected Gorbachev to lead the nation as general secretary.

Gorbachev showed himself to be a reformer from the start. After a few years of unsuccessfully trying to reform the bloated Soviet bureaucracy, he took more radical steps. His policy of glasnost called for more

openness, and he encouraged freedom of expression. His policy of perestroika led to a restructuring of government and the economy.

In foreign policy, Gorbachev sought friendlier relations with the West, and he signed several arms-reduction treaties with U.S. President Ronald Reagan. He withdrew Soviet troops from Afghanistan. He also allowed the new democracies of Eastern Europe to free themselves of Soviet control. For this achievement, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990.



Mikhail Gorbachev, 1986

Hard-line communists opposed Gorbachev's attempts to open up Soviet society, however. In August 1991, they held Gorbachev and his family under house arrest and tried to stage a coup. Reformers, led by Boris Yeltsin, quickly put down the plot. The failed coup signaled the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union. Within the year, the country had broken apart and Gorbachev had resigned.

Though many Russians charged that Gorbachev failed when he changed the Soviet Union without a plan or a goal, his policies had a tremendous impact on his country and on citizens all over the world. Today, many consider him to be one of the most influential leaders of the twentieth century.

Questions to Think About

1. What happened in August 1991?
2. What was Gorbachev's position when he was elected general secretary?
3. **Demonstrate Reasoned Judgment** Do you think the Soviet Union would have changed without Mikhail Gorbachev? Explain your answer.