

# The Collapse of Soviet Communism

Many historians argue that the history of the 20th century has been the struggle between Marxist-Leninist Communism and the liberalism of the democratic nations of the West. From 1917, the creation of the Soviet Union set the stage for the conflict and tension which came to a head in the Cold War following World War II.

By the early 1990s when Soviet Communism collapsed, ending nearly 75 years of domination, totalitarianism, and economic experimentation, Communist leaders lost control of over tens of millions of citizens from Russia to Eastern Europe, thus changing the nature of the struggle between East and West.

Relations between the Soviet Union and the United States had already begun to deteriorate during the latter years of the 1970s. By 1980, due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and other conflicts, and the election of Ronald Reagan as president, a new chapter unfolded in Soviet-U.S. relations.

From the early months of his presidency, Reagan spoke of the Soviet Union in negative terms, referring to the Communist state as “an evil empire.” Almost immediately, the Reagan White House began pursuing a policy of weapons buildup like nothing seen in nearly a generation. (By 1982, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev died, leaving new leadership to deal with Reagan.) Cruise missiles were added to the American arsenal in 1982, armed with nuclear warheads and capable of flying low enough to make it difficult for an enemy’s radar to detect them.

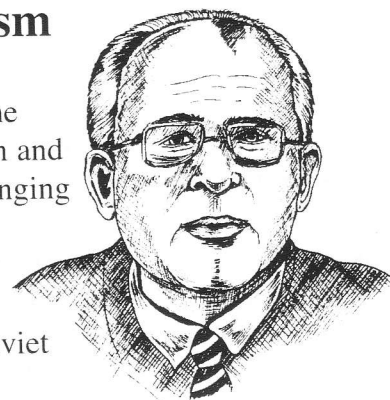
Reagan also began encouraging increased research in a new defense system for the United States. Known as the *Strategic Defense Initiative* or *SDI* (popularly, it was referred to as “Star Wars”), it was based on the production and deployment of dozens of space satellites capable of shooting down an incoming enemy missile. Although many experts questioned whether such a defense “shield” would work, Reagan’s intent was to force the Soviet leadership into an escalating arms race—one the Communist state could not afford and could not win.

These years of the mid-1980s were marked by poor leadership in the Soviet Union, making Reagan’s challenges more effective. By 1985, a new Soviet leader—Mikhail Gorbachev—came to power.

Gorbachev redefined the nature of Soviet foreign and domestic policy, challenging traditional Communist structures.

Sweeping changes came quickly to the Soviet Union at Gorbachev’s initiative. By 1987, he and Reagan negotiated a nuclear treaty—the INF Treaty. Gorbachev further opened the door for independence from Soviet control to Eastern satellite nations, such as the Warsaw Pact countries. The world watched in astonishment in 1989 and 1990 as Eastern Europe separated itself from Soviet domination for the first time since the end of World War II. Bankrupt and in the midst of internal change itself, the Soviet Union was no longer able or even willing to support Communist governments no matter how close to home.

Old Communist structures were soon swept aside—some literally. In 1989, the Berlin Wall, which had divided East and West Germany since the early 1960s, was destroyed, and by 1990, the Germans reunited as a democratic nation. By the end of 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed as the various Soviet republics moved for complete independence. On Christmas Day, Gorbachev resigned as Soviet leader and turned power over to a new leader, President Boris Yeltsin. For the first time since the end of World War I, there was no longer a Communist-dominated Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.



Mikhail Gorbachev

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## Review and Write

1. From your reading, what role did Ronald Reagan play in bringing about the final collapse of the Soviet Union?
2. Also from your reading, what role did Mikhail Gorbachev play in facilitating the end of the Soviet Union?