

Division and realignment in Europe, 1945-1992 | Sample answer

What was the contribution of Mikhail Gorbachev to Russian and European history? (2008)

Mikhail Gorbachev became the new leader of the Soviet Union in March 1985. As he was from a younger generation, his viewpoint on communism and the Soviet State differed from previous Soviet leaders. He was aware of the problems facing the Soviet Union, so change was essential and Gorbachev began at the top by surrounding himself with supporters of reform. In doing so, he was able to implement his policies of glasnost and perestroika or restructuring of the government. Gorbachev's rule would leave a long-lasting impact on both Russian and European history.

Gorbachev's main aim was to implement his policies Glasnost and Perestroika. Glasnost meaning 'openness' to discussion within Russia. Under this reform, censorship was eased, the Soviet paper "Pravda" was now allowed to print articles criticizing past failures of the Communist regime. Reporting restrictions were lifted, communist conferences were now broadcast live and greater religious freedom was allowed. Although positive that the Soviet Union could now have this freedom, some could argue that it was more than what Gorbachev had intended. This policy allowed the citizen's views on the communist governments to change which in effort played a role in the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In December 1988, Gorbachev made a speech to the United Nations, in it he announced he would be abandoning the Brezhnev Doctrine (the use of force on any uprisings). The Soviet states saw this and his policy Glasnost as a "relaxation" and it had the unintended

effect of reawakening long-suppressed nationalists and anti-Russian feelings in the Soviet republics. After the satellite states broke away from Soviet control by 1989, the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) began to look for their independence. In March 1990, Lithuania declared independence. Estonia and Latvia followed in August. Gorbachev was not prepared to accept this and so sent the Red Army into Lithuania, 14 people were killed. This event was used to undermine his leadership. After Georgia declared its independence in April 1991 Gorbachev called an emergency meeting of all states.

At this meeting, it was agreed that a new union would be formed in which Moscow would not control. However, this proved too much for some conservatives and Gorbachev was placed under house arrest while a coup d'état took place in Moscow. Boris Yeltsin suppressed it, and in doing so became the real hero of Russia. Without consulting Gorbachev, Yeltsin met with the leaders of Belarus and Georgia and signed a New Commonwealth of Independent States. On 25th December 1991, Gorbachev resigned as president of the Soviet Union and the USSR ceased to exist.

One of his greatest contributions on the foreign policy front was how he brought the cold war to an end and how successfully he established relations with the US. He was the man to put a human face to communism and he rebuilt the trust between the Superpowers. This was achieved through four summits with President Regan of the US regarding arms limitations and reductions of missiles. The first meeting was held in Geneva in 1985. In October 1986 the pair met in Reykjavik, in 1987 the US agreed to get rid of their missiles in Europe. In 1988 Regan visited Moscow and claimed that Russia wasn't an 'evil empire' anymore. In 1991 Gorbachev and President Bush signed the START Treaty to cut missiles. For the US, the Soviet Union was no longer a threat. The arms race programme had left the Soviet economy in a weakened state and so Gorbachev knew that the key to reform was cutting military spending which would involve improving Russia's relationship with the US.

Perhaps the ordinary Russians would rather like to forget the economic situation under Gorbachev. Higher wage demands forced the government to print more money which resulted in a rise in inflation. During this period 1988-89 wages increased by 20% to keep pace with inflation and to avoid strikes. Basic goods such as soap, washing powder and food were in short supply. By the end of 1990, a quarter of the population was living below the poverty line. It is notable that when Gorbachev won the Nobel Peace Prize it received very little attention at home and one commenter said, "Well it wasn't for his economics".

In 1989, Gorbachev received a huge welcome when he visited East Germany. Crowds shouted 'Gorby, Gorby, Gorby, save us!'. His influence and support against hardliner communist leader Honecker was instrumental in the falling of the Berlin Wall. When large crowds gathered in East Germany to protest and demand reforms, Gorbachev told the Soviet troops to stay in their barracks and not to intervene. By 9th November East Germans were allowed into West Berlin. That night the process of dismantling the Berlin Wall began. Germany was eventually reunited in October 1990. Slowly but surely other countries in Eastern Europe saw the collapse of communism. In Czechoslovakia 1989, following demonstrations, a new government was formed, with a new majority of non-communists in what was called the Velvet Revolutions. Romania saw a bloody coup that overthrew their dictator Ceausescu.

Despite Gorbachev's failure to maintain popular support within the Soviet Union, his achievements on the world stage level were enormous. His decision to improve the relationship with the US helped end the Cold War. His policies of glasnost and perestroika restored freedom to the people of the Soviet Union but encouraged freedom movements in Eastern Europe. His attempt to reform the Soviet Union from within ended with the collapse of Communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe.