

Division and Realignment in Europe, 1945 - 1992 | Sample Answer

How effective were the efforts of Khrushchev and/or Gorbachev in reforming the Soviet Union? (2015)

Following Stalin's death in 1953, a collective leadership took control, of which Khrushchev was part of. Malenkov was favourite to succeed but just as Stalin had done before KH used his position as party secretary to undermine him and gain support from the others. His leadership marked a crucial transition in communism and he ushered in an era of reform which included de-Stalinization and peaceful co-existence. As for Gorbachev's ruling, beginning in 1985, his ruling was much different from his previous successors. He was from a younger generation and so was aware of the problems facing the Soviet Union and knew that radical change was essential. He surrounded himself with supporters of his policies and by doing so was able to introduce his programs Glasnost and Perestroika. His rule would leave a long-lasting impact on both Russia and European History.

In 1956 KH made a famous speech to the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party, to which he launched a process known as de-Stalinisation. He intended to remove the idea that Stalin had been an infallible leader, whose actions had always been correct. In his speech, he condemned the attacks against the Kulaks in the 1920s, revealed details of the Purges 1930s and claimed that the Red Army was badly prepared for WWII. In practice of de-Stalinisation, he removed statues and portraits of Stalin from towns, renamed the city of Stalingrad to Volgograd, limited the power of the secret police and released thousands of political prisoners from labour camps. While his speech had not been published in Eastern Europe people heard about it and saw it as a relaxation of Soviet control over the satellite states. This friendly approach of KH, while commendable, brought problems for his ruling.

Evidence of this can be seen in the strikes and riots that broke out in Poznan Poland, 1956. Their leader Gomulka introduced a series of reforms and suggested that Poland might prefer to be independent of the Soviet Union. KH rushed to Warsaw to talk with Gomulka and they reached a compromise, Poland was not to leave the Warsaw Pact. While this revolt in Poland was dealt with in a peaceful manner by KH, this was not the same for the Hungarian Uprising October 1956. The country was displeased with their leader Rakosi and KH replaced him with Erno Gero, although this did not placate the people. On 23rd October, a group of students and workers marched the streets of Budapest attracting thousands of people along the way. On 28th, Imre Nagy was recalled to power in an attempt to calm things down although, Nagy announced on 1st November that Hungary was leaving the Warsaw Pact and KH ordered 30,000 Soviet troops into the country. The rising ended on 11th with 25,000 people killed. The manner in which the rising was crushed speaks volumes as to how far the soviet approach had been de-Stalinised.

On KH domestic front, the standard of living improved. There were more houses and flats built for workers. Wages went up by 18% and more consumer goods were produced. In 1954, he launched the Virgin Lands programme. Initially grain production increased by 70% but in the long run, it failed as the area was too dry and there were a series of droughts and eventually bread rationing was introduced. In summer 1962, food shortages drove people onto the streets in protest. Later in October KH was informed by Soviet council that he was no longer in charge and would have to step down.

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 efforts 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.

Gorbachev was not entirely effective in reforming the Soviet Union. Under his ruling communism collapsed and his economic policies failed. His policy of Perestroika saw rapid inflation as firms were now allowed to set their own prices and goods remained relatively scarce. Rationing and food queues became a feature of everyday life, something that was not meant to

happen under communism as it was meant to ensure that everyone's needs were met. The state borrowed heavily and economic growth fell to -13%. However, it should be noted that he was effective in establishing positive relations with Britain and America, something that his previous leaders did not succeed as much in. In the West, he was hailed for his "New Thinking" in foreign affairs. He established close relationships with leaders such as Helmut Kohl and Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher became his closet European peer and had many discussions on Perestroika and difficulties of economic reforms. She tried to get him to stop the unification of Germany and only disagreed with him on nuclear weapons. Their frequent conversations played a positive role in highlighting to Gorbachev just how threatening the West viewed the Soviet Union, i.e. memories of Hungary and Czechoslovakia rising.

In conclusion, KH certainly improved the living standards in the Soviet Union through his reforms. He genuinely wanted to make improvements to the everyday lives of the citizens but was let down by bad planning. By visiting many countries and his policy of "peaceful co-existence" with the US he was the first Russian leader to give communism a "human face". Concerning Gorbachev, his policies of Glasnost and Perestroika were more radical than KH in attempts to reform the Soviet Union, although unfortunately did not succeed. Both leaders did succeed in reforming the Soviet Union by dissociating it from the terrorizing and violent state that lived under Stalin's rule.