# Introduction: A New Russia

For four decades, the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a struggle called the Cold War. The two superpowers built up arsenals of nuclear weapons capable of destroying civilization and extended their influence to every corner of the globe. The U.S.-Soviet rivalry drove the United States to create a vast network of alliances and formidable military. Two generations of U.S. policy makers believed containing the spread of Soviet communism was their principal mission.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of an era for U.S. foreign policy. With the Soviet threat gone, U.S. foreign policy lost its primary focus. Many in the United States turned away from issues overseas and put their former enemy out of their minds.

Yet, the former Soviet Union (FSU) still casts an enormous shadow. Russia—by far the largest of the fifteen former Soviet states—is a giant among nations. The country covers one-seventh of the earth's land and contains huge reserves of oil, gas, minerals, and other natural resources. Russia assumed control of most of the Soviet Union's powerful military and its permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Russia possesses a nuclear arsenal comparable to that of the United States and a powerful army. Washington and Moscow are no longer the bitter enemies they were during the Cold War, but neither are they allies. For all of these reasons, the relationship between Russia and the United States remains extremely important.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia experienced nearly a decade of economic turmoil and political upheaval. Many Russians felt humiliated by their country's decline from a mighty superpower to a struggling country with a crippled economy and ineffective government.

Today, Russia has emerged from this period of turmoil and is reclaiming an active role in international relations. Confident and assertive voices have risen in Russian politics.

> ***"Russia has now regained a sense of self-respect. We spent so many years feeling there was something wrong with us—others lecturing us on how we should live and where we should go. But we have overcome our inferiority complex."***
>
> —Valentina Matviyenko, governor of St. Petersburg, July 11, 2007

In the coming days you will consider many aspects of the relationship between these two powerful countries. Then you will join in the debate on U.S. policy toward Russia. You will grapple with the same questions that face U.S. policy makers: should the United States view Russia as a potential ally, a tough rival, a growing threat, or something else? How do Russian policies affect the United States? What policies should the United States make to manage its relationship with Russia?

What you read in the following pages will help you consider these questions. Part I surveys the history of U.S.-Russian relations from the nineteenth century to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Part II examines the transformation that Russia has undergone since 1992. Part III reviews the issues at the top of the U.S. agenda regarding Russia.

## Russia at a Glance

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|---|---|
| Area: | 17,075,200 square kilometers |
| Arable land: | 7.3% |
| Population: | 139 million |
| Life expectancy at birth: | 59 male<br>73 female |
| Per capita gross domestic product: | $15,900 |
| Internet Users | 40 million |

Data from the CIA World Factbook.

# Part I: Exploring Russia's Past

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat and world traveller, predicted that the United States and Russia would eventually dominate the world. At the time of Tocqueville's observation, international power was concentrated in Western Europe, particularly in Britain and France. Tocqueville saw virtually boundless potential in the United States and Russia.

> ***"America's conquests are made with plowshares, Russia's with the sword;...nevertheless, each seems called by some secret desire of Providence one day to hold in its hands the destinies of half the world."***
>
> —Alexis de Tocqueville

In terms of geography, the United States and Russia had much in common. Both were enormous countries with vast frontiers and great natural wealth. But whereas two great oceans protected the United States from overseas aggression and provided accessible ports on both coasts, Russia was militarily vulnerable and economically isolated.

### *How did geography affect Russia's development as a world power?*

The broad plain that sweeps across Europe into the Russian heartland has left Russia open to invasion from the west throughout its history. In addition, Russia's lack of ice-free ports has stifled trade and limited Russian naval strength.

As Tocqueville noted, geography placed both the United States and Russia on the path to world power. Geography also accounted for many of the differences between the two societies.

In contrast to the democratic, federal system of the United States, Russia in the nineteenth century was a highly centralized authoritarian state. The Russian tsars (a word that comes from the Roman title of "caesar") ruled their empire with almost unrestrained power. Government resources supported a huge military.

### *What concerns did U.S. and Russian leaders share?*

Despite their political differences, U.S. and Russian leaders shared a common concern during much of the nineteenth century—the British Empire. While the United States feared British meddling in North America, Russia struggled with Britain for influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. During the Crimean War of 1853-56, the United States favored Russia in its conflict with Britain, France, and Ottoman Turkey. Forty U.S. doctors even went to Russia as volunteers to treat wounded Russian soldiers.

Mistrust of Britain also helped pave the way for U.S.-Russian agreement on the sale of Alaska. In the early nineteenth century, Russia, Britain, the United States, and Spain each claimed territory on the Pacific Coast of North America. Russian explorers reached North America by way of Alaska, undertaking their first expeditions in the 1740s. By the 1800s, the Russian presence extended as far south as California. Like the Spanish colonies in the southwest, Russian trading posts were sparsely settled and poorly defended. Russian officials worried that the British, who at the time controlled Canada, would seek to expand into Alaska. The Russians saw the United States as a counterweight to Britain and were eager to open negotiations with Washington on Alaska. In 1867, the two sides quickly agreed that the United States would buy the huge territory for $7 million.

> ***"We do not know in the entire world two states which could offer each other so many qualities promising friendship and alliance as Russia and the United States of America."***
>
> —Russian stock reports, 1868

But U.S.-Russian relations took a turn for the worse when the United States entered the competition for empire at the turn of the century. With victory in the Spanish-American War of 1898, the United States acquired colonies in the Caribbean and the Pacific. In addition, U.S. trade with Asia and U.S. naval power increased. As a result, U.S. and Russian ambitions increasingly came into conflict. In China, for example, the United States' desire for open trading relations collided with Russia's efforts to control the northeastern Chinese province of Manchuria.

## The Birth of the Soviet Union

World War I forever changed U.S.-Russian relations and the balance of power in Europe. The United States entered the war in April 1917 on the side of Russia, Britain, and France. President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) and a great majority of U.S. citizens had vigorously opposed U.S. involvement when fighting broke out in Europe in August 1914. German submarine attacks against U.S. shipping and a growing fear that Germany would emerge as the dominant power in Europe convinced Wilson to join the Allies.

By the time the United States declared war, Russia was in chaos. On the battlefront, the Russian army had suffered nearly four million deaths and lost huge amounts of land to Germany. Politically, Tsar Nicholas II had been forced from power in March 1917. A newly established democratic government had vowed to continue the war, but increasing misery and instability undermined both the war effort and the new government.

In November 1917, Vladimir Lenin led a communist revolution in Russia. Lenin proclaimed a workers' state and pulled Russia out of the war.

### *Why was the United States suspicious of Lenin?*

Like Britain, France, and other countries of the West, the United States was suspicious of Lenin. In the short term, Lenin's decision to sign a separate peace treaty with Germany increased the military pressure on the remaining Allies. More unsettling for the long term was Lenin's plan to spread the communist revolution worldwide. The Allies sent small contingents of troops to Russia to aid forces inside the country opposing the communists. Nevertheless, by 1921 the communists had

### Socialism, communism, and capitalism

**Socialism** is an economic system in which the community or the state controls the production and distribution of resources in order to increase social and economic equality. Generally in socialist systems, the state or community—rather than individuals—owns resources such as land and businesses. **Communism** is a political stage after socialism without social classes, property ownership, or even government. Although communism has never been achieved by any state in the modern world, people in the United States usually refer to the Soviet Union as a communist country.

**Capitalism** is an economic system in which resources are all or mostly owned by individuals and operated for profit. Production and distribution of goods is left up to individuals or market forces such as supply and demand.

For much of the twentieth century, the United States acted on the belief that the world was divided into two camps: governments supportive of communism and those supportive of capitalism. For a while, it believed that all communists took orders from and acted on behalf of the Soviet Union, which was seen as a mortal enemy to the United States. Many within capitalist countries were also opposed to socialism because the property rights of individuals who owned land or businesses in socialist countries were threatened by the socialist system.

established control over much of the old Russian Empire. The following year, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), or Soviet Union, was officially formed.

The Soviets watched as the United States, Britain, and France molded the international system after the surrender of Germany and the other Central Powers in November 1918. At the peace conference in Paris, the Allies redrew Russia's frontier without inviting Soviet participation. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, as well as Finland, were created from the old Russian Empire's lands. Most of Poland was formed from the territory of the empire, while Romania received the province of Bessarabia.

***Why was the Soviet Union barred from the League of Nations?***

The Soviets were also barred from joining the League of Nations, a global organization that was designed to settle international disputes and thwart aggression. (The U.S. Senate voted against U.S. membership in the League in 1920, although the organization was largely a creation of U.S. President Wilson.) The strategy of the Allies was meant to isolate the Soviet Union internationally and block the spread of communism.

***Why did Josef Stalin industrialize the Soviet Union?***

Communism, in fact, made little headway after World War I. Except for the existence of a communist government in Hungary for a few months in 1919, communism failed to take root outside the borders of the old Russian Empire. Lenin's successor, Josef Stalin, turned the attention of the Soviet Union away from pursuing worldwide revolution and toward industrializing the struggling Soviet economy. Stalin believed that the Soviet Union had to industrialize at all costs in order to compete against the capitalist countries of the West.

To achieve his goals, Stalin fashioned a "command economy." Under Stalin's rule, the state controlled all aspects of economic activity and directed the distribution of goods for the whole country. Government planners made every decision, from how much wheat would be grown to how many shoes would be manufactured. Soviet communism represented a rejection of the capitalist system of the United States, Britain, and other Western countries, where most economic decisions were made by individual producers and consumers.

The Soviet economic experiment won considerable admiration in the United States and Europe, especially after an economic depression struck the West in 1929. Some observers found the concept of government control over the economy attractive. Others supported the emphasis on equality that was central to communist ideology. In the early 1930s, when one-quarter of the labor force in the United States was unemployed, Stalin could claim that the state provided everyone with a job in the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the closed nature of Soviet society smothered news about Stalin's reign of terror and network of prison camps. More than ten million died as a result of Stalin's policies.

**"A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic."**

*—Josef Stalin*

***How did the rise of Hitler change Western perceptions of the Soviet Union?***

In the 1930s, the rise of Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler forced the leaders of the United States, Britain, and France to reconsider the balance of power in Europe. Containing German aggression became the chief foreign policy goal of the Western democracies. As a result, Western perceptions of the Soviet Union quickly shifted. Western leaders now saw the Soviets as a potential ally against Germany. In 1933, the United States established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. The following year, the Soviets were admitted to the League of Nations.

Hitler and Stalin believed that war between German Nazism and Soviet communism was inevitable. During the 1930s, both leaders pressed forward with plans for a rapid military buildup. Between 1933 and 1938, German defense spending increased ninefold, while the Soviets raised their military expenditures by fifteen times. By 1938, Germany's defense budget was the largest in the world—five times higher than U.S. levels.

***What were the results of the "Pact of Steel?"***

In August 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union stunned the West by signing a non-aggression treaty. The next month, Germany invaded Poland from the west. A few weeks later, the Soviets invaded from the east.

The so-called "Pact of Steel" proved temporary. In June 1941, Hitler directed his armed forces against the Soviet Union. The invasion was the first step in Hitler's grand strategy of repopulating the vast plains of the Soviet Union with German colonists.

The struggle between the Nazis and the Soviets was titanic. The Soviet Union lost twenty-seven million people and saw its land devastated by the German onslaught. At Stalingrad alone—the battle that turned the tide of the war in the winter of 1942-43—the death toll suffered by the Soviet army was more than three times the number of U.S. deaths for the entire war.


Harper in the *Birmingham News-Herald*, April 1945.

**"He can't break this handclasp!"**

During World War II the Soviet Union and the United States were allied against Germany. During the course of the war, the United States provided the Soviet Union with roughly $11 billion (worth about $130 billion today) of military supplies, as well as crucial intelligence on German military operations. The shipment of two hundred U.S. fighter aircraft, for example, allowed the Soviets to mount a key counter-offensive against the Nazis in December 1941.

***What was the outcome of the Yalta Conference?***

By the time Josef Stalin met President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill at the Black Sea resort of Yalta in February 1945, the Soviets were poised to play a decisive role in post-war Europe.

Stalin could rightfully claim that his country had shouldered the greatest burdens in fighting the Germans. "Uncle Joe," as Stalin was known to many U.S. citizens during the war, had also convinced Roosevelt that the Soviets were reliable allies. At Yalta, Stalin pledged to help the United States defeat Japan once the war with Germany was over. In exchange, the Soviets were allowed a freer hand in shaping the future of Eastern Europe.

***How did the end of World War II affect the world's leading powers?***

When soldiers from the United States and the Soviet Union shook hands on the banks of the Elbe River in central Germany on April 25, 1945, it signalled the beginning of a new international order. World War II had crippled the old European power system. Nazi Germany was defeated and destroyed. Britain had bankrupted its economy to achieve victory. France and Italy faced poverty and social upheaval.

Among the leading powers, only the United States and the Soviet Union emerged from the war with a strengthened position in the international arena. The United States stood unrivaled as the mightiest nation on earth. Spared from attack, the U.S. economy had soared out of the depression to produce much of the equipment needed for the Allied war effort. Moreover, the United States in 1945 possessed the world's most advanced military and the only atomic weapons. The Soviet Union was a formidable force in its own right. Despite their enormous war losses, the Soviets had built up an army of twelve million soldiers to defeat Nazi Germany.

***What did Winston Churchill mean by the "Iron Curtain"?***

The alliance of World War II quickly dissolved once the fighting ended. By February 1946, Stalin predicted that the conflict between communism and capitalism would lead to a new war. Meanwhile, his troops remained firmly in place throughout much of Eastern Europe. Churchill had warned his U.S. allies of the Soviet threat even while World War II was raging. In 1946, after losing the prime minister's post, he became more convinced that Stalin was seeking to divide Europe in two. In March, Churchill presented his concerns to a U.S. audience in Fulton, Missouri.

> ***"From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest, and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere."***
>
> —Winston Churchill, March 5, 1946

## Containing Soviet Expansion

Soviet influence in Eastern Europe was far from the mind of most U.S. citizens at the close of World War II. President Roosevelt had acknowledged at the Yalta conference that public opinion would not permit U.S. troops to remain in Europe for more than two years after the war. President Roosevelt based his assessment on the traditional U.S. distaste for involvement in European affairs.

A shift in U.S. attitudes began in a small circle of U.S. policy makers led by George F. Kennan. A diplomat at the U.S. embassy in Moscow during World War II, Kennan sent an eight-thousand-word cable to the State Department in February 1946 that dismissed the possibility of cooperating with the Soviet Union. Kennan believed that the Soviet system was based on paranoid hostility toward the outside world and proposed that the United States seek to contain the expansion of Soviet communism. In the long run, Kennan felt communist ideology would lose its aggressive edge and begin to soften. Kennan's memorandum was circulated widely among U.S. policy makers.

***What was the Truman Doctrine?***

Kennan's concept of "containment" shaped the policies of those in the Truman administration who wanted to stand up to the Soviets in Europe. In March 1947, President Truman (1945-1953) announced his intent to "support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure."

Known as the Truman Doctrine, the policy statement was linked to a request to Congress for military aid to Greece and Turkey. Although few U.S. citizens were deeply interested in the Greek civil war or Soviet territorial claims in Turkey, communist aggression was increasingly viewed as a serious menace. This marked the beginning of what was known as The Cold War, a global contest between the United States and the Soviet Union that would last for forty years.

The Truman Doctrine led to two expensive U.S. commitments. In April 1948, after lengthy debate Congress approved the European Recovery Program. Better known as the Marshall Plan, the program was an economic aid pack-

age that invested $12.5 billion (worth about $130 billion today) into the reconstruction of sixteen European states. Although they were invited to participate, the Soviets refused U.S. assistance, and barred their Eastern European satellites from accepting aid.

Militarily, the United States joined with ten countries of Western Europe and Canada in 1949 to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). By 1955, NATO had expanded to include thirteen European members, including West Germany. By signing the NATO treaty, the United States committed itself to the defense of Western Europe and pledged for the first time in history to maintain a substantial U.S. troop presence overseas.

***Why were U.S. citizens worried about the global political climate in the early 1950s?***

The United States in 1950 was in many respects at its zenith in global power. The U.S. share of the world's income was 52 percent. U.S. citizens held 49 percent of international financial reserves. The United States produced approximately half of the world's oil and steel. And yet, many were deeply worried by the international political climate. In less than a decade, the United States had been thrust into the role of global policeman. Senator Robert Taft and others warned that too much emphasis on foreign affairs and military strength would warp U.S. democratic values. Secretary of Commerce Henry Wallace feared that Truman's policies would "divide Europe into two warring camps" and hoped to promote international cooperation through the United Nations.

> ***"It is one thing to agree to go to war with Russia if it attacks Western Europe. It is another to send American ground troops to defend Norway or Denmark or Holland or Italy or even France and England."***
>
> —Senator Robert Taft, July 1949

The opinions of Taft, Wallace, and others had been aired at thousands of town-hall meetings throughout the country while Congress debated the Marshall Plan. But by 1950 most U.S. citizens were prepared, if reluctantly, to shoulder greater international responsibilities.

International events shaped the consensus that emerged around U.S. Cold War policies. In June 1948, the Soviets imposed a blockade on the western part of Berlin to unify the German capital under communism. (Western Berlin had been placed under U.S., British, and French control after the war. The Soviets controlled the eastern part of Berlin.) With overland traffic cut off by the surrounding Soviet forces, the United States and its allies airlifted eight thousand tons of supplies daily to western Berlin. The Berlin blockade lasted almost a year until the Soviets backed down.

More ominous developments followed. In September 1949, the Soviets exploded their first atomic bomb. The next month, communists led by Mao Zedong won control of mainland China and joined Moscow in pressing for the spread of communism worldwide. In June 1950, communist North Korean forces invaded South Korea, drawing the United States into a three-year conflict that ended in a stalemate.


Fred O. Seibel in *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 1948. Used with permission.

## Nuclear Standoff

By the mid-1950s, U.S. leaders had given up on the idea that the frontier of communism in Eastern Europe could be rolled back by force. President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961) rejected appeals for U.S. military intervention when the Soviets sent tanks into Hungary in 1956 to crush a revolt against Soviet rule. Rather, U.S. leaders reluctantly accepted the Soviet sphere of influence in Hungary and elsewhere behind the "Iron Curtain." (A sphere of influence is a region or country where another country influences or controls events where it has no formal authority.) These countries were known as the Soviet bloc. At the same time, Eisenhower and his successors believed that the United States had no choice but to maintain its role as a military superpower.

***How did Soviet nuclear weapons force the United States to rethink national security?***

Moscow's development of nuclear weapons forced U.S. defense planners to devise a new approach to national security. The U.S. government built up conventional, or non-nuclear, forces and increased the U.S. military presence in Western Europe to deter Soviet aggression. By 1955, the number of U.S. troops in the region had reached 431,000, and over half of the U.S. military budget was for defending Europe. Meanwhile, U.S. policy makers hoped to maintain their head start in the arms race. In 1947, Truman ordered that four hundred nuclear weapons be ready by 1953. Under Eisenhower, the doctrine of "massive retaliation" committed the United States to use nuclear weapons in case of a Soviet attack on Western Europe.

***What was the Cuban missile crisis?***

The arms race almost erupted into nuclear war in October 1962 when the Soviets attempted to secretly install nuclear missiles on the island of Cuba. After discovering Moscow's preparations, President John F. Kennedy (1961-1963) demanded that the missiles be withdrawn. Kennedy imposed a naval blockade on Cuba and warned that the United States would take stronger military action to remove the Soviet installations. Two weeks of tension followed before the Soviets agreed to remove the missiles.

## U.S.-Soviet Détente

As Western Europe recovered from World War II, the primary arena of U.S.-Soviet confrontation shifted to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Vietnam was one of the main flashpoints. The war the United States waged against communism in Southeast Asia had been inherited from France. The French had been the colonial rulers of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos for nearly a century before leaving the region in defeat in 1954. U.S. policy makers viewed the effort to protect the anti-communist government in South Vietnam as part of the global battle against communist expansion.

> ***"[The United States will] pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to ensure the survival and the success of liberty."***
>
> —President John F. Kennedy, January 20, 1961

By the end of the 1960s, U.S. involvement in Vietnam had compelled many U.S. citizens to reconsider their country's role in the world. From George Kennan's original focus on Europe, the U.S. policy of containing Soviet communism had widened into a global enterprise. As domestic opposition to the Vietnam War deepened after 1968, U.S. policy makers increasingly sought to define the limits of U.S. interests.

At the same time, large shifts in international relations challenged long-standing assumptions of the Cold War. In the 1950s and 1960s, Western Europe and Japan had moved quickly to close the economic gap with the United States. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union had nearly caught up to the United States in military power.

The Soviets made it clear again that they

would use force to maintain the communist system in the Soviet bloc. The most notable challenge to Moscow—a budding reform movement within the Czechoslovak leadership—was smashed in 1968 by Soviet troops.

***How did President Nixon change U.S. policy towards the Soviet Union?***

President Richard M. Nixon (1969-1974) led the reassessment of U.S. foreign policy. In Congress and as Eisenhower's vice president, Nixon had built his political career around staunch anti-communism. Nevertheless, in 1972, he visited China and the Soviet Union. In Moscow, Nixon signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT), a major agreement between the two superpowers on controlling nuclear weapons. This opened an era of "détente." Nixon hoped détente (a French word meaning "relaxation of tensions") would produce a new set of rules for superpower conduct and prevent international crises such as the Berlin blockade. The Soviets, for their part, saw the improvement in relations as an acknowledgment of their status as an equal of the United States.

> ***"Both the United States and the Soviet Union share an overriding desire to achieve a more stable peace in the world."***
>
> —President Richard Nixon, June 1, 1972

Much of the desire for détente came from the tremendous increase of Soviet nuclear weapons during the 1960s. After being pressured to withdraw their nuclear missiles from Cuba in 1962 by the United States, Soviet leaders vowed to erase the nuclear advantage that the United States had long enjoyed. For the remainder of the decade, the Soviets invested heavily in their nuclear program.

***How did détente change U.S.-Soviet relations?***

By the mid-1970s, détente had changed superpower relations. The new order was affirmed by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), a gathering in Helsinki, Finland, that brought together the United States, the Soviet Union, Canada, and thirty-two European countries. The CSCE produced an agreement in 1975 that recognized the division of Europe into Western and Soviet camps and also affirmed the importance of human rights. In addition, each side permitted representatives from the opposing side to observe their military maneuvers, thus reducing the likelihood of a surprise attack.

Soviet leaders hailed the accord as legitimizing their domination over Eastern Europe. At the same time, the citizen groups that formed in the Soviet bloc to monitor the human rights provisions of the agreement became a thorn in their side.

***What events led to the collapse of détente?***

As the 1970s came to a close, détente became less meaningful. In 1976, the Soviets raised anxiety among NATO leaders by aiming a new generation of nuclear missiles at Western Europe. Meanwhile, Moscow resented the emphasis on human rights in the foreign policy of President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981). Détente collapsed altogether in December 1979 when the Soviet army invaded neighboring Afghanistan to prop up a pro-Soviet government. The Carter administration responded by imposing an embargo on trade with the Soviet Union and boycotting the 1980 summer Olympic games in Moscow. An arms-control treaty, known as SALT II, stalled in the U.S. Senate. U.S.-Soviet relations deteriorated further with the election of U.S. President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989). Spurning détente, Reagan came to office attacking the USSR as the "evil empire" and calling for an increase in U.S. defense spending.

In the Soviet Union, the reassertion of U.S. military power prompted the Soviet leadership to reconsider the USSR's role in the world. In the mid-1980s, Moscow found itself bogged down in a costly war against Muslim guerrillas in Afghanistan, while at home the Soviet economy stagnated. Politically, the country faced uncertainty too. When Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev died in 1982, he was replaced

by an aged member of his inner circle, Yuri Andropov, who died after fifteen months. Konstantin Chernenko succeeded Andropov, but died a year after assuming power. Following Chernenko's death, power in the Soviet Union passed to Mikhail Gorbachev who represented a younger generation.

## Gorbachev's New Thinking

By the time Mikhail Gorbachev was selected to head the Soviet Communist Party in 1985, his country was struggling. Internationally, the Soviet system had lost much of its appeal. At home, the Soviet economy was beset by corruption and inefficiency. More significant for Moscow's global ambitions, Soviet science and technology were falling further behind the West.

***How was Gorbachev different from earlier Soviet leaders?***

Gorbachev was a contrast to previous Soviet leaders. In his mid-fifties, energetic, and open to new ideas, Gorbachev stood apart from the generation of communist officials influenced by memories of Stalin and World War II. He recognized that the Soviet Union would need to undergo serious change to maintain its superpower status. Initially, Gorbachev tried to spur greater productivity and discipline among Soviet workers. He launched a campaign against alcohol abuse by reducing the availability of vodka and other spirits.

The new Soviet leader's early efforts failed to halt the Soviet Union's decline. In 1987, Gorbachev unveiled a more sweeping set of reforms to reinvigorate the Soviet Union. *Perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) opened up Soviet society to the outside world like never before.

> ***"We must not pretend that everything goes smoothly.... If we are silent about some shortcomings, they will inevitably grow."***
>
> —Mikhail Gorbachev

Gorbachev hoped that greater contact with the West would bring new technology and investment into the Soviet Union. A key element of his strategy stressed improving Moscow's international image. Gorbachev proved especially bold in proposing arms control initiatives with the United States. Ironically, his partner on the U.S. side of the Cold War thaw was Ronald Reagan, once a stalwart opponent of détente.

***How did Gorbachev's policies change international relations?***

Gorbachev's policies were equivalent to an earthquake in international relations. The tremors also shook Eastern Europe. Although Gorbachev had no intention of giving up the Soviet Union's Eastern European empire, he was not willing to use military force to maintain control. The first challenges to communist authority occurred in Poland and Hungary in 1988, where democratic movements forced government officials to open up the political process. In 1989, popular pressure brought down communist regimes not just in Poland and Hungary, but also in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania. The dramatic changes continued into 1990, when West and East Germany were reunified after forty-five years of division. The Cold War was clearly over.

The revolutions in Eastern Europe and the reunification of Germany were hailed throughout the world as a victory for democracy. In the Soviet Union public opinion was mixed. Many Soviets, particularly those who remembered World War II, felt that control over Eastern Europe and the presence of 370,000 Soviet troops in East Germany provided a buffer against outside attack and affirmed the Soviet Union's status as a superpower.

***How did events in Eastern Europe contribute to the Soviet republics' desire for autonomy?***

In contrast, many people within the Soviet Union were emboldened by events in Eastern Europe. Since 1988, non-Russian national groups in the Soviet Union's republics had been campaigning for greater control over their

own affairs. In 1990, Lithuania was the first of the Soviet Union's fifteen republics to openly declare independence from Moscow. Gorbachev cut off supplies of heating oil to Lithuania and sent in troops to occupy Communist Party property. Other republics, including Russia itself, continued to seek more autonomy from the central government.


Reproduced from *Sovetskaya Rossiya*.

Tsar Peter the Great, champion of Russian expansion, orders Gorbachev and Yeltsin to be punished: "Beat them—100 lashes for the ones who ruined the Russian empire."

***How did* perestroika *contribute to the weakening of the government's authority?***

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union's economic reforms had stalled. Under Gorbachev's program of *perestroika*, Moscow's grip on the Soviet economy relaxed. Factory managers and farm directors were given greater decision-making power. The Soviet Union also had become more open to foreign investment. But *perestroika* was a halfway measure. Gorbachev feared that lifting price controls and taking other measures to create a free-market economy would turn people against the Soviet system and undermine the authority of the Communist Party.

By 1990, the Soviet economy was in a tailspin. The country's economic output fell 8 percent that year. The next year it dropped 19 percent. Faced with mounting problems and conflicting demands, Gorbachev struggled to hold onto power. Politically, he walked a tightrope between reformers and hard-liners.

In 1991, Gorbachev opened negotiations with leaders from the Soviet Union's fifteen republics on establishing a new relationship with the central government. In August 1991, the tightrope snapped under Gorbachev's feet. Hard-line communists launched a coup to reassert the power of the central government. But the coup organizers had little active support outside the top ranks of the Communist Party. Within three days, their plot collapsed.

***How did the failed coup accelerate the demise of the Soviet Union?***

Following the coup, the pace of change in the Soviet Union accelerated. Russian Republic President Boris Yeltsin moved decisively to transfer power from the central government to the Russian Republic. The three Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were quickly recognized as independent states. Other republics soon followed.

The death blow to the Soviet Union came in December 1991, when leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus announced the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Unable to hold the USSR together, Gorbachev resigned as Soviet president. On December 25, 1991 the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

In Part I you have read about the history of Russian-U.S. relations. In Part II, you will read about the dramatic changes Russia has experienced since the end of the Soviet Union. As you read, try to imagine how these developments might affect Russian views of the world and their relationship with the United States.