



Andrew Mitchell

The Cold War endgame

TopFoto

US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev at a meeting in Washington, DC on 8 December 1987

Reagan, Gorbachev and people power

Exam links

- AQA A2** Triumph and collapse: Russia and the USSR, 1941–91
- AQA A2** Aspects of international relations, 1945–2004
- Edexcel AS** Politics, presidency and society in the USA, 1968–2001
- OCR (A) AS** The Cold War in Europe from 1945 to the 1990s

Argument

Personalities or people power?
Historians are divided over the relative merits of the role of personalities or the rise of people power as the most significant cause of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the 40-year long Cold War.

How did the Cold War end? **Andrew Mitchell** examines the roles of superpower leaders Reagan and Gorbachev and the effect of people power

In seeking to explain the end of the Cold War, many historians have focused on the actions and influence of US president Ronald Reagan and the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Other prominent figures, such as British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Pope John Paul II, also played important (if secondary) roles. Here, we will concentrate on the impact of Reagan and Gorbachev's leadership on Cold War relations during the 1980s.

Reagan triumphant?

According to the 'Reagan victory school' or 'triumphalist' perspective, the president's uncompromising hard-line approach to the USSR in the early 1980s imposed enormous economic and military pressures on the Soviet Union. As a result, the USSR could no longer compete with US defence spending and was compelled to abandon both the arms race and the Cold War. This explanation is favoured by the political right in the USA to account for the 'victory' of the West and capitalist democracy in the Cold War. Historians who either partly or wholly endorse the triumphalist viewpoint include Peter Schweizer, John Lewis Gaddis and Jonathan Haslam.

This interpretation maintains that, in order to reassert US primacy, Reagan abandoned the discredited détente policies of the previous Carter presidency, which had enabled the USSR to strengthen its position relative to the USA. The new hard-line US policy of 'militarised counter-revolution' was deliberately introduced to squeeze the Soviet Union into economic submission. Meanwhile, Gorbachev pursued reform to strengthen the USSR politically and economically, and thus preserve its superpower status. Reagan's strategy, however, forced the Soviets to abandon the Cold War.

Criticism of the Reagan victory school

The Reagan victory school interpretation has been criticised by other historians and some members of the Reagan administrations, including former secretary of state George Schultz and former US ambassador to Moscow Jack Matlock. They have argued that the triumphalist account of the end of the Cold War oversimplifies a complex historical process and exaggerates the impact of Reagan's anti-communist policies.

These critics claim that Reagan's uncompromising stance prolonged the Cold War by hardening Soviet resistance and failing to extract concessions from the USSR's leader Yuri Andropov between 1982 and 1984. Moreover, Reagan's offer to share Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) technology with the Soviets contradicts the triumphalist argument that the USA's aim was to undermine the Soviet Union economically. Soviet scientists concluded that the SDI was impractical and therefore the USA exerted limited pressure on the USSR.

Critics have also maintained that both President Reagan's and his successor George Bush's policies of constructive engagement with Gorbachev after 1985 produced more significant results, such as the 1987 INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces) Treaty and the 1991 START (Strategic Arms Reduction) Treaty.

Finally, the Reagan victory school tends to underestimate the role played by other factors in ending the Cold War, notably:

- Gorbachev's 'New Thinking', based on **perestroika**, **glasnost** and a commitment to arms reductions
- long-standing internal problems of the USSR
- growing popular discontent in Eastern Europe

Gorbachev: breaking the mould?

For other historians and political commentators, Gorbachev's leadership ended the Cold War. In their view, he rejected the Cold War stalemate of earlier decades and attempted to create a new climate of East-West understanding. To achieve this, he adopted new policies after 1985 to:

- build greater trust between the superpowers
- reduce Cold War tensions
- solve the USSR's economic problems

The pro-Gorbachev explanation challenges the Reagan victory school by emphasising that the Soviet leader was the key political actor influencing events in the final phase of the Cold War. Historians who either partly or wholly endorse this pro-Gorbachev viewpoint include Robert J. McMahon, Archie Brown and Raymond L. Garthoff.

From this perspective, Gorbachev took the key actions which defused Soviet-US hostility:

- Gorbachev was the first leader of the USSR to abandon the traditional Soviet approach to Cold War relations in favour of international cooperation and compromise. This radical shift in attitude was responsible for transforming East-West relations after 1985.
- Gorbachev had the ability, as a dynamic, personable and educated man, to build bonds of trust with key leaders in the West, notably Reagan, Thatcher and Bush.
- Gorbachev's New Thinking produced significant Cold War breakthroughs with the West.
- Gorbachev's speeches and actions encouraged political reform in Eastern Europe and led to the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet bloc.

Reagan's policies

Militarised counter-revolution was a central feature of Reagan's hard-line anti-communist policies, which included:

- a 53% increase in the US defence budget (October 1981)
- announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a US laser defence system (March 1983)
- uncompromising anti-Soviet rhetoric which consigned Marxism to the 'ash heap of history' and condemned the USSR as an 'evil empire'
- implementation of the Reagan Doctrine to weaken the USSR's global influence, including US military and financial measures to combat communism in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Grenada and Afghanistan
- deployment of Cruise and Pershing II missiles in Europe

- perestroika
- (re)construction
- Gorbachev's economic reforms which aimed to introduce private enterprise and reduce state control.
- glasnost (openness)
- Gorbachev's attempt to liberalise and democratise the Soviet political system.

Soviet satellite states
East Germany, Poland,
Czechoslovakia,
Hungary, Romania and
Bulgaria.

Helsinki Accords At the
Conference on Security
and Co-operation
in Europe (1975), 35
countries signed accords
by which both Eastern
and Western blocs
agreed to observe
frontiers, respect human
rights and allow the
self-determination of
peoples.

Pope John Paul II
(1920–2005) The Polish
John Paul II criticised
human rights abuses in
the Eastern bloc, took
a public stand against
communism, and called
for moral and spiritual
renewal.

People gathered at
the Brandenburg Gate
following the fall
of the Berlin Wall in
November 1989

Questions

- Which superpower leader deserves the most credit for ending the Cold War, Reagan or Gorbachev?
- Why did Gorbachev pursue radically new Cold War policies from 1985?
- How important was the role of people power in bringing the Cold War to an end?

Criticism of the pro-Gorbachev interpretation

The focus on the last Soviet leader has led to wide-ranging criticism of the pro-Gorbachev explanation. As with the triumphalist view, this interpretation has been challenged on the grounds that it:

- oversimplifies a complicated historical process
- exaggerates the personal impact of one individual

One important criticism is that it was beyond the ability of any one leader to direct or guide the complex and often unpredictable developments which ended the Cold War. Gorbachev's inability to control the speed and extent of political liberalisation in Eastern Europe in 1989 is a case in point. An over-concentration on Gorbachev also underestimates the constructive role played by Reagan from 1984 in seeking a better relationship and lasting agreements with the USSR.

Gorbachev-centred explanations can obscure or underplay the broader structural factors which helped to end the Cold War. These factors include the Soviet Union's mounting economic problems and the growing social discontent in the Soviet satellite states, both of which pre-dated Gorbachev's leadership.

Finally, some Soviet critics, including Sergei Akhromeyev and Georgi Kornienko, have argued that Gorbachev effectively caved in to the West. This was due to pressure exerted on the Soviet Union by a US campaign of subversion which was designed to undermine the USSR rather than to end the Cold War.

Assessment

The personality perspective focuses on the key individuals who wielded significant influence in the years leading up to the end of the Cold War. Such an approach is valuable in examining Soviet behaviour, bearing in mind Gorbachev's radically new approach to Cold War relations. It can also highlight how the national leaders had to cope with the various constraints and pressures that were present during the closing stages of the Cold War.

Personality-based explanations can be problematic because they may:

- exaggerate the importance of a key individual in the events which ended the Cold War
- underestimate the relative importance of structural factors such as economic problems and widespread social discontent

People power in the Soviet bloc

People power (popular pressure) in Eastern Europe also played an important role in ending the Cold War. Mounting discontent in the Soviet satellite states during the 1980s culminated in large-scale protests that undermined the communist regimes and led to the collapse of the Soviet bloc. In short, the people of Eastern Europe rejected Marxist-Leninism and their political masters.

As the term 'people power' suggests, this approach concentrates on the impact of events from below rather than the influence of high politics and the role of national leaders. Historians who regard people power in the Eastern bloc as an important part of



the explanation for the end of the Cold War include Joseph Smith and Carole Jones.

Growing popular discontent in Eastern Europe

The 1980s witnessed growing popular disillusionment with communist rule in the Soviet satellite states. There were several reasons for this rising tide of public disaffection. One key factor was the decline in East European living standards in the 1980s due to:

- high prices and unemployment
- housing, food and consumer goods shortages
- a reduction in Soviet subsidised oil and natural gas supplies to the Eastern bloc as world prices dropped
- large debts owed to the West

Developing trade links with the West during détente in the 1970s also made citizens of the satellite states aware of higher Western living standards and encouraged many of them to take an interest in free-market capitalism. Furthermore, the Eastern bloc regimes continued to rely on political repression and censorship to maintain themselves in power which dashed the popular expectations raised by the Soviet Union signing the Helsinki Accords (1975). At the conference, the Soviet Union agreed to end radio and television jamming, and this enabled Eastern bloc citizens to see and hear about the higher standard of living enjoyed by Western bloc citizens. This became a major source of discontent in the East.

The appointment of a Polish Pope, **John Paul II**, in 1978 had an impact because it:

- sharpened public resentment of state communist anti-religious policies
- galvanised Polish Catholics
- boosted support for the **Solidarity** movement in Poland

Another factor was the growth of nationalism in Eastern Europe, notably in East Germany, which challenged the satellite states' 'official' loyalty to the USSR and the international doctrine of communism.

People power and the end the Cold War

Several features of the Cold War endgame in the 1980s suggest that people power played an important role. Before 1989, growing discontent in Eastern Europe placed increasing pressure on the satellite regimes and the USSR for change. In 1980–81, for example, when the Polish government registered the independent trade union Solidarity, strikes and Solidarity membership increased.

Faced with economic problems, the Hungarian government attempted to quell public disquiet by introducing multi-candidate elections in 1983 and, 5 years later, the Hungarian communists, led by Imre Pozsgay, began round table talks on reform with other parties. In January 1989, Hungary announced that free elections would be held in 1990 — the first satellite state to make this commitment.



Figure 1 Map of Eastern Europe, 1990

The sweeping nature of political change throughout the Eastern bloc in 1989–90 (Box 1 and Figure 1) also supports the people power viewpoint for two reasons:

- the rapid and largely non-violent removal of all the satellite regimes (except in Romania) revealed that communism had suffered an almost total collapse in terms of popular legitimacy

- Solidarity Led by Lech Walesa, this independent Polish trade union became a focal point for anti-communist opposition, defied political repression and in 1989 led a coalition government.

Box 1 Political changes in Eastern Europe, 1989–90

- Albania** Parliament backs liberal reforms, May 1990
- Bulgaria** Government pledges free elections and new constitution, 1990
- Czechoslovakia** Communist leadership ousted. Vaclav Havel becomes president, December 1989
- Estonia** Begins separation from USSR, April 1990
- Germany** Fall of Berlin Wall, November 1989. Reunification of East and West Germany, October 1990
- Hungary** Free elections oust communists from power, April 1990
- Latvia** Begins separation from USSR, April 1990
- Lithuania** Independence declared, despite opposition from Soviets, March 1990
- Poland** Lech Wałęsa first popularly elected president, November 1990
- Romania** Communist leader Nicolai Ceaușescu deposed and executed in violent protests, December 1989. National Salvation Front seizes power, May 1990
- Yugoslavia** Free elections, December 1989, followed by war and break-up of country in 1990s

Gorbachev's key actions

Gorbachev pursued arms reductions to lower the risk of nuclear war and ease Soviet economic problems. He was prepared to make concessions over nuclear weapons because he no longer believed the USA would attack the USSR. Gorbachev:

- offered in 1985 to remove all nuclear weapons by 2000
- negotiated the INF Treaty (1987) with the USA which dismantled a class of intermediate-range nuclear missiles
- concluded the START Agreement (1991) with the USA which reduced overall nuclear arsenals by 30% and land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) by 50%

Gorbachev 'de-ideologised' the Cold War. He:

- abandoned the Brezhnev Doctrine, endorsed freedom of choice and dismissed Marxist-Leninism as irrelevant
- introduced perestroika reforms into the Soviet economy (1986)
- told the East European communist regimes they would have to govern without Soviet support (1989)
- gave the Eastern bloc countries, via glasnost, the right to choose their own paths

Gorbachev abandoned traditional Soviet aggression and expansionism. He:

- announced (1988) that Soviet forces in Eastern Europe would be reduced by 500,000
- withdrew Soviet forces from Afghanistan by 1989
- terminated Soviet financial support to Ethiopia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Nicaragua and Angola
- made no attempt to stop the liberalisation of the Soviet bloc

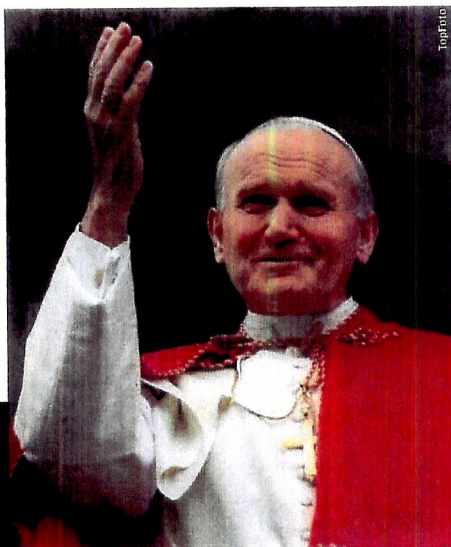
- popular pressure pushed the process much further than Gorbachev had envisaged

The Soviet leader had hoped that the East European states would evolve into a liberalised socialist 'commonwealth' which would retain ties with the USSR. Gorbachev's preferred solution was quickly overtaken by events.

Brezhnev Doctrine

A 1968 Soviet foreign policy that called for Warsaw Pact forces to intervene should any Eastern bloc state seek to compromise communist rule and leave the Soviet sphere of influence.

Pope John Paul II — the appointment of a Polish pope in 1978 boosted support for the Solidarity movement in Poland



Weblinks

An excellent range of material covering the roles of Reagan, Gorbachev and people power in the Cold War endgame can be found at: www.tinyurl.com/p8rn9df

Details of the Helsinki Accords can be found at: www.tinyurl.com/pqaxwc7

Further reading

Important aspects of the personalities interpretation are considered in an accessible way in the following books:

Gaddis, J. L. (2005) *The Cold War*, Penguin.

McMahon, R. J. (2003) *The Cold War: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press.

The following studies make interesting points about the impact of people power in the Eastern bloc:

Jones, C. B. (2010) *Understand The Cold War*, Hodder.

Smith, J. (1998) *The Cold War 1945–1991*, Blackwell.

The limits of people power

Although growing discontent in Eastern Europe had a role to play in ending the Cold War, the people power perspective needs to be set in a wider context to make a realistic assessment of its influence.

At an international level, it offers a rather limited explanation for the end of the Cold War since it underestimates:

- the overall impact of Gorbachev's radically new approach to US–Soviet Cold War diplomacy after 1985
- the consequences of Reagan's 'militarised counter-revolution' and subsequent accommodation with the USSR for Cold War relations.

It should also be recognised that, without Gorbachev's intervention, the popular protests in Eastern Europe in 1989 would have turned out very differently. By abandoning the Brezhnev Doctrine and championing freedom of choice, the USSR's leader had effectively given the people of Eastern Europe the green light to embark on political change without fear of Soviet reprisals. At crucial points in 1989, Gorbachev also urged the Polish and East German communist regimes not to use force against protesters.

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