When Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as president of the USSR on Christmas day 1991, the Soviet Union had ceased to exist. The Cold War was finally over. This monumental turning point in modern world history had occurred, amazingly, with little bloodshed. Perhaps just as astonishing was that no one had predicted this rapid collapse of the ‘other’ superpower. The United States and British intelligence services were as surprised as the East German border guards when the iconic symbol of the Cold War, the Berlin Wall, was torn down in November 1989. The collapse of the Soviet Empire meant that the Cold War was definitely at an end. However, even before this happened in 1989, relations between the Soviet Union and the United States had changed dramatically.
What was the impact of Mikhail Gorbachev?

For the Soviet Union, Stalin’s ‘legacy’ meant that politically the Soviet Union remained an authoritarian, one-party state and that economically it was focused on producing military hardware rather than housing, transport, food, consumer goods and health care. ‘We can’t go on living like this’, Mikhail Gorbachev is reported to have said on the eve of his succession as General Secretary to the Politburo. Not only was he the youngest leader to have this position since Stalin, but he was also the first university-educated leader since Stalin.

Gorbachev introduced two key reforming ideas – perestroika and glasnost. Perestroika (restructuring) aimed at restructuring the economy and glasnost (openness) was the principle that every area of the regime should be open to public scrutiny. This represented a radical change in politics in the Soviet Union. It involved greater ‘democratization’, with more people involved in the Communist Party and in political debate.
Through these strategies, Gorbachev intended to make the Soviet system more productive and responsive, and he realized that part of this process also had to involve a reduction in military spending. He knew that, if his reforming ideas were going to work, the Soviets could not rise to the challenge of matching Reagan’s SDI system. He decided to abandon the arms race and attempt a negotiated reduction in arms with the USA. It was not just for economic reasons that Gorbachev wanted arms control. ‘He called for a new thinking in international affairs, and he said that there could be ‘no winners’ in a nuclear war. Gorbachev declared the world to be interdependent and likened all its people ‘to climbers roped together on the mountainside’ (John Mason, The Cold War, Routledge, 1996).

The Chernobyl disaster, when an explosion destroyed a reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Ukraine, only heightened Gorbachev’s awareness of the dangers of nuclear power. As Anatoly Chernlayev, an aide to Gorbachev, put it, ‘Gorbachev knew even before that catastrophe about the danger of nuclear weapons. That explosion showed that, even without war and without nuclear missiles, nuclear power could destroy human kind’ (quoted in the CNN television series, The Cold War).

Reagan was also interested in disarmament and had previously put forward to the Soviets an arms control proposal known as ‘Zero Option’, which would eliminate all intermediate-range missiles in Europe. Gorbachev, unlike his predecessors, was prepared to discuss this option. This resulted in the two leaders meeting together in four summits to discuss arms control:

- Geneva Summit, November 1985: No substantial progress was made but the two leaders did agree that ‘a nuclear war cannot be won and must not be fought’.
- Reykjavik Summit, October 1986: Talks ended without agreement, mainly because of disagreement over SDI. Gorbachev said that SDI should be ‘confined to the laboratory’, but Reagan refused to make any concessions. However, the talks also covered the most sweeping arms control proposals in history, and Gorbachev declared that it had ‘been an intellectual breakthrough’ in relations between the United and States and the Soviet Union.
- Washington Summit, December 1987: An Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty (INF Treaty) was signed which actually agreed to abolish weapons – land-based missiles of intermediate and shorter range. This was an important first step in reducing the nuclear stockpiles of the two superpowers. Agreement was also reached for the first time on inspection of the destruction of missiles.
- Moscow Summit, May 1988: Again there was disagreement over SDI, but arms reductions negotiations continued. Standing in Red Square, Reagan confessed that he now no longer believed in the ‘evil empire’.

Other foreign policy initiatives by Gorbachev were reassuring to the West. By 1988, Gorbachev had announced his plans to withdraw from Afghanistan and he pulled back Soviet aid to its ‘allies’ in the developing world.

The ‘thawing’ of the Cold War continued under the new U.S. president, George H.W. Bush. At the Malta Summit between the U.S. and Soviet leaders in 1989, Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze announced that the superpowers had ‘buried the Cold War at the bottom of the Mediterranean’.

What was the role of Ronald Reagan?

Clearly, Gorbachev’s willingness to tackle the issue of nuclear weapons, along with his new style of politics and doing business with the West, were key to explaining the breakdown of the Cold War. However, many historians also give Reagan credit for this and argue that
it was his approach to the Soviet Union in the early 1980s that was crucial for pushing the Soviet Union into arms negotiations. An article critical of the ‘Reagan victory school’ describes this view below:

As former Pentagon officials like Caspar Weinberger and Richard Perle … and other proponents of the Reagan victory school have argued, a combination of military and ideological pressures gave the Soviets little choice but to abandon expansionism abroad and repression at home. In their view, the Reagan military build-up foreclosed Soviet military options while pushing the Soviet economy to the breaking point. Reagan partisans stress that his dramatic Star Wars initiative put the Soviets on notice that the next phase of the arms race would be waged in areas where the West held a decisive technological edge.

D. Deudney and G.J. Ikenberry, ‘Who won the Cold War?’, in Foreign Policy, no. 87, Summer 1992, p.124

This ‘Reagan victory school’ view is therefore critical of the ‘détente’ approach to relations with the Soviet Union as explained below by Patrick Glynn:

The Jimmy Carter-Cyrus Vance approach of rewarding the Soviet build-up with one-sided arms control treaties, opening Moscow’s access to Western capital markets and technologies, and condoning Soviet imperial expansion was perfectly designed to preserve the Brezhnev-style approach, delivering the Soviets from any need to re-evaluate (as they did under Gorbachev) or change their policies. Had the Carter-Vance approach been continued … the Cold War and the life of the Soviet Union would almost certainly have been prolonged.

Patrick Glynn, letter to the Editor, Foreign Policy, no. 90, Spring 1993, pp.171–3

Other historians, such as Michael MacGwire, also claim that Reagan played an important role, but believe this role was more connected to his views on anti-nuclearism, which helped to convince Gorbachev at the different summits of the possibilities of halting the nuclear arms race. Reagan’s character and willingness to engage with Gorbachev was also important:

I know of no one else of a leadership stature in the United States in those days who would have moved forward as Reagan did, to engage Gorbachev, to engage the Western Alliance, to truly lead the Western Alliance, and to take us through what became, of course, a very constructive introductory period to the end of the Cold War.

Rozanne Ridgeway, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State interviewed on the CNN television series, The Cold War

Ridgeway’s view is supported by historian R.J. McMahon:

To his great credit, Reagan proved willing first to moderate, and then to abandon, deeply held personal convictions about the malignant nature of Communism, thereby permitting a genuine rapprochement to occur.

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Review question
Who do you believe played the more important role in bringing about a new relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union – Gorbachev or Reagan?

Long-term factors in the ending of the Cold War
What was the role of the Soviet economy?

Although the actions of Gorbachev and Reagan are important for explaining how events turned out as they did, it is also important to look at the long-term forces that were at work in pushing the Soviet Union into ending the Cold War. By the time Brezhnev died in 1982, both the political and economic policies of the Soviet Union were in crisis.

Under Brezhnev the Soviets spent even more resources on foreign policy. Although involved in important arms treaties with the USA, it was under Brezhnev that the USSR achieved ‘parity’ with the USA in the nuclear field and, in some areas, surpassed it. This was achieved at a high price. Brezhnev’s era is remembered as a period of stagnation and decline in the USSR. This is due to the serious lack of spending not only on consumer goods, but on the domestic economy as a whole. Brezhnev left his successors an economy that was still based on the ‘command economy’ structure of Stalin’s day. It was falling behind in modern technology and industrial output was declining. A large proportion of the agricultural workers lived below the poverty line and grain was imported from North America. Workers had little incentive to work harder or produce better goods. Labour morale was low, with high absenteeism and chronic alcoholism.

When Gorbachev took over, he inherited an economy in serious trouble. It could thus be argued that Gorbachev was forced to take the actions that he did in both internal reform and negotiations with the West. Given this situation in the Soviet Union, some historians argue, in direct contradiction with the historians of the ‘Reagan victory school’, that keeping the Cold War going through containment and détente played a role in bringing about the end of the Cold War rather than prolonging it.

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Document analysis
The West did not, as is widely believed, win the Cold War through geopolitical containment and military deterrence. Nor was the Cold War won by the Reagan military build up and the Reagan Doctrine… Instead, ‘victory’ for the West came when a new generation of Soviet leaders realized how badly their system at home and their policies abroad had failed. What containment did was to successfully stalemate Moscow’s attempts to advance Soviet hegemony. Over four decades it performed the historic function of holding Soviet power in check until the internal seeds of destruction within the Soviet Union and its empire could mature. At this point, however, it was Gorbachev who bought the Cold War to an end…

Raymond L. Garthoff ‘Why Did the Cold War Arise and Why Did it End?’ in Michael J. Hogan (ed), The End of the Cold War: Its Meaning and Implications (CUP, 1992) p.129

Questions
1 Explain the meaning of the following phrases used in the extract:
   • geopolitical containment
   • military deterrence
   • Soviet hegemony
   • internal seeds of destruction.

2 What is the overall message of this document regarding the reasons why the Cold War ended?

3 Compare and contrast what Raymond Garthoff says about the reasons for the end of the Cold War with those given by Patrick Glynn on page 212.
What was the role of nationalism and people power in ending the Cold War?

What no one understood, at the beginning of 1989, was that the Soviet Union, its empire, its ideology – and therefore the Cold War itself – was a sand pile ready to slide. All it took to happen was a few more grains of sand. The people who dropped them were not in charge of superpowers or movements or religions: they were ordinary people with simple priorities who saw, seized, and sometimes stumbled into opportunities. In doing so they caused a collapse no one could stop.

From John Lewis Gaddis, The Cold War (Penguin, 2005) p.238

In the late 1980s, a resurgence in nationalist movements began to develop in most of the satellite states. The reasons for this were a combination of the continued deterioration of living standards, the fact that the USSR was becoming less involved in the internal affairs of these countries and the implications of Gorbachev’s reforms. Gorbachev made it clear that he was unwilling to use force to maintain control over the satellite states.

In a speech to the United Nations, on 7 December, 1988, he announced that the Soviet Union would cut by half a million men its commitment of troops to the Warsaw Pact. ‘It is obvious,’ he argued, ‘that force and the threat of force cannot be and should not be an instrument of foreign policy … Freedom of choice is … a universal principle and it should know no exceptions.’ This was a clear signal to the peoples and governments of Eastern Europe. Gorbachev had made it clear that the Brezhnev Doctrine would not be applied, and 1989 saw an amazing series of revolutions in the satellite states, resulting in the whole Soviet system, including Stalin’s legacy, being swept away.

The events of 1989

START HERE
May 1989
The fence between Hungary and non-Communist Austria is dismantled by Hungarian government.

March 1990
Latvia declares independence from the USSR. The other Baltic States follow.

December
Ceausescu is overthrown and executed. Huge demonstrations take place in Bulgaria against the Communist government.

September
East Germans who are on holiday in Hungary and Czechoslovakia refuse to return home; they escape through Austria into West Germany.

October
Gorbachev visits East Germany and makes it clear to Honecker that he will not use Red Army to put down the demonstrations which are taking place in the East German cities.

November
East German government eases travel restrictions. East Germans march to Berlin Wall and force guards to let them through. The Berlin Wall is dismantled by East and West Berliners. Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia.

June
In Poland, Solidarity wins a majority in free elections.
The process by which the Soviet Union collapsed began in May 1989 when the Hungarian government dismantled the barbed-wire fences on the border with Austria. Thousands of Hungarians and East Germans then crossed over to Austria in order to cross into West Germany.

**Events in Poland**

In Poland, the union movement called 'Solidarity' had been suppressed in 1981 by General Jaruzelski. He had then declared a state of martial law. Nevertheless, there continued to be popular support for Solidarity due to the combination of economic stagnation that the government failed to solve and support from the Catholic Church. In response to Gorbachev's reforms, Solidarity was legalized in 1988, and some attempt to introduce reforms was made. Solidarity won the first free elections in Poland in 1989. Jaruzelski remained President, but a Solidarity leader became Prime Minster. The Communist Party had been defeated by a huge popular vote, and the government was the first in the Eastern bloc since the 1940s not to be controlled by the Communists. Gorbachev had not intervened to support the old Communist regime and, in the absence of internal or external support, the Polish Communist Party collapsed.

**STUDENT STUDY SECTION**

**Cartoon analysis**


**Questions**

1. What is the aeroplane supposed to represent? What is significant about the way the cartoonist has drawn the aeroplane?
2. Who are the passengers supposed to represent?
3. What is enabling Poland to jump out of the aeroplane?

**Events in East Germany**

Erich Honecker, a hardline Communist, had been the leader of East Germany since 1971. Although considered one of the more 'successful' countries in the Eastern bloc, living standards were well below those enjoyed by their fellow Germans in the West. Honecker
used sport as a focus for nationalism, but this did not create a sense of an East German society, and many people still looked forward to the day when Germany would be reunified. Evidence of the insecurity felt by Honecker’s regime was the extremely repressive nature of the East German secret police, the Stasi. The Stasi kept files on 5.5 million people. The regime was unpopular, but Honecker was particularly hated. By the mid-1980s there was growing pressure on the government to remove him.

Honecker hoped to consolidate Communist control in East Germany during the celebrations for the 40th anniversary of the GDR. However, people criticized the harsh and repressive East German system and openly demanded reforms. Thousands of East German holidaymakers in Hungary crossed into Austria across the now open border. These ‘escapes’ were a return to the days before the building of the Berlin Wall – a mass exodus of East Germans (on one day alone 125,000 crossed to the West). More alarming still for the regime were the groups, like the ‘New Forum’, that decided to stay and resist rather than flee to the West. Honecker wanted to use force to control the swell of anti-Communist party feeling. Gorbachev, however, made it clear that he would not intervene if there were a full-scale revolt. Demonstrations in East German cities continued to grow and a new leader, Egon Krenz, was put in place by the Politburo. In order to try to stem the flow of people from East Germany, the government announced on 9 November 1989 the easing of travel and emigration restrictions. Although not actually intending this to mean an immediate opening of the checkpoints through the Berlin Wall, the lack of clarity in the official statement meant that thousands of East Berliners immediately descended on the checkpoints. The East German guards were taken by surprise and, lacking direction from above, had to go ahead and open the barriers that night. Within 24 hours, the Berlin Wall had ceased to be the symbol of Cold War division and instead its destruction by the people – both East and West Berliners – had become the symbol of the ending of the Cold War. When free elections were held in 1990, parties in favour of unification with West Germany won a majority of seats. East and West Germany were finally reunited on 3 October 1990.

Events in Hungary

Reform in Hungary came more from within the Hungarian Communist Party itself. Reformers, encouraged by the new policies expounded from Moscow, sacked the hardline leader, Kadar, and then dominated the government. On 23 October 1989 Mátyás Szűrös declared the Third Hungarian Republic and became interim president. Hungary’s first free elections were held in 1990.
Events in Czechoslovakia

The changes that took place in Czechoslovakia that led to the downfall of the Communist regime have become known as the ‘Velvet Revolution’ as there was very little violence. People power can be seen as the clear driving force here. The government was forced to respond to mass demonstrations calling for reform. The campaign was co-ordinated by an organization called the Civic Forum and, in 1989, a leading dissident playwright, Vaclav Havel, was elected president. The Warsaw Pact nations, including the USSR, issued an official statement condemning the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia as ‘illegal’ and promising never to again interfere in each other’s internal affairs.

Events in Romania

In comparison to the ‘Velvet Revolution’ in Czechoslovakia, events in Romania were far more violent. Its leader was President Ceausescu and his regime was one of the most repressive in Eastern Europe. However, in December 1989, inspired by news of events in Hungary and by the killing of demonstrators by the Romanian army in Timisoara, there was an uprising against Ceausescu and his wife. When the Ceausescus appeared at a rally in the Romanian capital, Bucharest, one week after the army had killed 71 people in Timisoara, they met with a hostile reception. The army now refused to take action against the demonstrators. Ceausescu and his wife tried to flee, but were arrested by the army and then executed on Christmas Day, 1989.

At the beginning of 1989 the Communists had been in complete – and seemingly permanent – control of Eastern Europe. At the end of the year, they were gone. Democratic coalitions, promising free elections in the immediate future, had taken place in East Berlin, Prague, Budapest, Warsaw and even Bucharest … As a result, the Warsaw Pact had been, in effect, dismantled. The Soviet Union had withdrawn inside its borders. The Cold War in Europe was over.

*Stephen Ambrose sums up the events of 1989 in Rise to Globalism (Penguin, 1991) p.378*

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**Cartoon analysis**

**Questions**

1. Explain what is happening in the cartoon.

2. What is the message of the cartoon regarding events in Eastern Europe?

‘The Pace of History Quicksens’,
The end of the USSR

Abroad, Gorbachev’s policies brought admiration and in 1990 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. At home, however, failure to bring about an improvement in the country’s economic situation meant that he became increasingly unpopular. Events in Eastern Europe brought about calls for independence from the republics of the Soviet Union. Thus, during 1991, the Soviet empire disintegrated. In August, the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, claimed their independence, as did the republics that had been part of the USSR (see map below).

This break-up of the Soviet Union intensified hostility towards Gorbachev in the Soviet Union and, in August 1991, there was an attempted coup by Communist hardliners against him. This was defeated by Boris Yeltsin and although Gorbachev was restored, he had now lost authority. On 25 December 1991, Gorbachev resigned as president. The Commonwealth of Independent States was established and the Soviet Union formally ceased to exist.
What was the impact of the fall of the USSR and the end of the Cold War?

The collapse of the Soviet Union had a huge impact on international politics as well as the economic situation of countries that had been dependent on the Soviet Union for aid.

For many in the United States, it seemed that they were the ‘winners’ and international politics became ‘unipolar’ with the USA as the only country now capable of having a military alliance around the world. Capitalism seemed to have triumphed. Communism remained the official ideology in only a few states – Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam and China, and even in China and Vietnam, changes in economic controls allowed free-market forces to have an impact.

For Cuba, the drying up of Soviet economic aid, along with the U.S. trade embargo, brought about an economic crisis. Similarly other regimes in Africa formerly supported by the Soviet Union suffered economically. In other states, which had been the focus of superpower conflict and fighting, such as Afghanistan, conflict continued: ‘Indeed, many of the Third World countries that had been the focus of excessive superpower interest in the 1970s and 1980s were dubbed “failed states” in the 1990s as civil strife continued unabated and often with relatively little attention from the rest of the world’ (Jussi Hanhimäki and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War*, OUP, 2004, p.630). The 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States led to a new focus for U.S. foreign policy: the War on Terror … Islamic extremism was identified by the U.S. government as the new global enemy.

### STUDENT STUDY SECTION

**Research activity**

Research the role of Boris Yeltsin, both in the coup against Gorbachev, and later as President of the Russian Federation.

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**Review activity**

1. Draw a spider or flow diagram to show the factors bringing about the end of the Cold War. Distinguish between short and long-term factors on your diagram.

2. A former U.S. Secretary of State said, ‘The cold war did not have to end with a whimper; it could have ended with a bang’. What factors do you feel prevented the Cold War ending with a ‘bang’?

3. Plan and film a documentary on the collapse of the Soviet Union. Work in groups; you will need to decide on:
   - a title for the documentary
   - who you are going to interview – you will have to take on different roles for the interviews
   - what images you will want to include
   - if you are going to include references to all the countries involved or you if are going to focus on just one or two countries
   - if you are going to portray a particular viewpoint with regard to Gorbachev’s actions or if you are going to try to maintain a ‘neutral’ approach.

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**Essay question**

- To what extent was Gorbachev responsible for bringing about the end of the Cold War?

**Essay planning hints**

*Introduction:* Put the question into context. Explain when the end of the Cold War took place. Set out the key factors you will be discussing and your main line of argument.
Main body: Don’t forget to start with the factor that is given to you in the question – in this case Gorbachev. Your first paragraph should thus deal with the impact of Gorbachev in bringing about the end of the Cold War – both in terms of his relations with the United States and also his attitude towards the satellite states and how these relationships ultimately led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

You then need to look at other factors:
- the impact of Reagan
- problems within the Soviet Union (you particularly need emphasis on the economic situation here)
- people power.

There are plenty of opportunities for you to bring historiography into this essay; include references to the historians and extracts that are mentioned in this chapter. You should also distinguish between the long- and short-term causes.

Conclusion: You need to decide how far the actions of Gorbachev were the most important factors in the ending of the Cold War. Was he key? Or do you come down on the side of the Reagan victory school? Or maybe the view that the economic situation would have led to the collapse of the Soviet Union anyway?

Research and discussion questions

Below are some research and/or discussion questions on the post-Cold War era:

1. What has been the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union
   a. on the European Union?
   b. on Yugoslavia?
   c. on NATO?

2. What has been the impact of the end of superpower rivalry on the UN? (Refer back to Chapter Fourteen.)

3. How has the relationship between Russia and the West developed since 1989?

4. Is the situation with regard to nuclear weapons now safer or less stable?

5. Is the ‘War on Terror’ the new Cold War? Can lessons be taken from the Cold War on how the War on Terror should be fought?