

Lesson 6: The Dissolution of the Communist Bloc and the Aftermath

1. Video Lesson

2. Competencies

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

Discuss Gorbachev's reforms of perestroika and glasnost and their consequences;

3. Brainstorming Question

What were the major reforms introduced by Gorbachev?

Lesson Presentation

Although reform in the Soviet Union slowed down between 1969 and 1982, a generational shift gave new momentum for reform with the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. The Chernobyl Accident in 1986 also added impetus for reform. The Chernobyl Accident of 1986 was a nuclear power plant disaster at Chernobyl, in the Ukrainian Republic of the USSR. The accident produced a spiral of radioactive debris that drifted over parts of the western USSR, Eastern Europe, and Scandinavia. The accident raised concerns about the safety of the Soviet nuclear power industry while forcing the Soviet government to become less secretive.

Gorbachev and his supporters challenged the way the party and bureaucracy had traditionally managed the Soviet government and economy. Under the program of perestroika, or restructuring, Gorbachev proposed major economic and political reforms. Gorbachev and his advisors considered policies to liberalize the economy and move it rapidly toward a free market. The government also relaxed restrictions on foreign trade and investment. In addition, Gorbachev soon launched ambitious political and social reforms. The most dramatic change was adopting glasnost, or openness about public affairs. This reform allowed an exceptionally broad public discussion and criticism of Soviet history and Soviet Communist Party policy. In quick succession, the Soviet authorities released political prisoners, relaxed censorship in the mass media, encouraged debate over the sins of the Soviet past.

In 1989, Soviet domination and Communist rule in Eastern Europe came to an end. The wall that had divided East and West Germany since 1961 was torn down, and in 1990, Germany once again became a unified country. By 1991, the communist governments of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania were brought down as revolution swept Eastern Europe. On September 6, 1991, the Soviet government recognized the independence of the three Baltic States. Then, on December 1, 1991, Ukraine reaffirmed its independence after a popular referendum in which 90% of voters opted for independence. On December 8, 1991, the leaders of the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian republics met and signed the Belavezha Accords, declaring the Soviet Union dissolved and replaced by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Consequences of the Collapse of the Communist Bloc

- Hundreds of thousands of people began migrating from Eastern to Western Europe to look for work
- Caused very serious political challenges, particularly in different parts of Eastern Europe.
- Economic strains reinforced ethnic and religious conflicts for example a civil war led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The Czechs and the Slovaks, unable to establish a stable and unified state, hence divided Czechoslovakia into two separate nations in 1993.