Impact of Mikhail Gorbachev

General Secretary Gorbachev Presents Reforms

On March 11, 1985, Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Strongly believing that the Soviet Union needed massive liberalization in order to revitalize both the Soviet economy and society, Gorbachev immediately began implementing reforms.

He shocked many Soviet citizens when he announced the ability for citizens to freely voice their opinions and the need to entirely restructure the Soviet Union's economy. Gorbachev also opened the door to allow Soviet citizens to travel, cracked down on alcohol abuse, and pushed for the use of computers and technology. He also released many political prisoners.

Gorbachev Ends Arms Race

For decades, the United States and the Soviet Union and been competing with each other over who could amass the largest, most lethal cache of nuclear weapons. As the United States was developing the new Star Wars program, Gorbachev realized that the Soviet Union's economy was seriously suffering from the excessive spending on nuclear weapons. To end the arms race, Gorbachev met several times with U.S. President Ronald Reagan.

At first, the meetings stagnated because trust between the two countries had been missing since the end of World War II. Eventually, however, Gorbachev and Reagan were able to work out a deal where not only would their countries stop making new nuclear weapons, but they would actually eliminate many that they had accumulated.

Resignation

Although Gorbachev's economic, social, and political reforms as well as his warm, honest, friendly, open demeanor, won him accolades from around the world, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990, he was criticized by many within the Soviet Union. For some, his reforms had been too big and too fast; for others, his reforms had been too small and too slow.

Most importantly, however, was that Gorbachev's reforms did not revitalize the Soviet Union's economy. On the contrary, the economy took a severe downturn.

Excerpts from: http://history1900s.about.com/od/people/p/gorbachev.htm
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The failing Soviet economy, the ability of citizens to criticize, and the new political freedoms all weakened the power of the Soviet Union. Soon, many Eastern bloc countries abandoned Communism and many republics within the Soviet Union demanded independence.

With the falling of the Soviet empire, Gorbachev helped establish a new system of government, including the establishment of a president and the end of the Communist Party's monopoly as a political party. However, for many, Gorbachev was going too far. From August 19-21, 1991, a group of hard-liners of the Communist Party attempted a coup and put Gorbachev under house arrest. The unsuccessful coup proved the end of both the Communist Party and the Soviet Union.

Facing pressures from other groups who wanted more democratization, Gorbachev resigned his post as president of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991, a day before the Soviet Union officially dissolved.

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